Labor, Civil Rights, and the Struggle for Democracy in Mid-Twentieth Century Texas

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of History in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

What happens when the dominant binary categories used to describe American race relations—either “black and white,” or “Anglo and Mexican”—are examined contemporaneously, not comparatively, but in relation to one another? How do the long African American and Chicano/a struggles for racial equality and economic opportunity look different? And what role did ordinary people play in shaping these movements? Using oral history interviews, the Texas Labor Archives, and the papers of dozens of black, brown, and white activists, this dissertation follows diverse labor, civil rights, and political organizers from the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s.

Tracing their movements revealed a startling story. Beginning in the mid-1930s, African American and ethnic Mexican working people across Texas quietly and tentatively approached one another as well as white laborers for support in their efforts to counter discrimination at work, in their unions, and in the cities in which they lived. Such efforts evolved in different ways due to the repression of the early Cold War, but most organizers simply redirected their activism into new channels. By the close of the 1950s, new forms of multiracial alliances were beginning to take hold. Mutual suspicion slowly gave way to mutual trust, especially in San Antonio. There, and increasingly statewide, black and brown activists separately developed robust civil rights movements that encompassed demands not only for integration but also equal economic opportunities and the quest for independent political power.

The distinct civil rights and labor movements overlapped, especially in the realm of electoral politics. By the mid-1960s, what began as inchoate collaboration at the local
level had gradually expanded from its origins in the *barrios*, ghettos, union halls, and shop floors to become a broad-based, state-wide coalition in support of liberal politicians and an expansive civil rights agenda. At the same time, African American and ethnic Mexican activists were engaged in new waves of organizing for both political power and civil rights, but they encountered opposition from members of their own ethnic groups. Thus the activists’ efforts to forge *inter*-ethnic coalitions coexisted with protracted *intra*-ethnic conflict. In many cases distinctions of class and political philosophy and tactics mattered at least as much as did ties of ethnicity. Activists learned this lesson experientially: in the trenches, through countless small conflicts over several decades, they slowly separated themselves from their more conservative counterparts and looked to multiracial coalitions as their primary strategy for outflanking their *intra*-ethnic opponents. Meanwhile, organized labor and white liberals had been searching for allies in their efforts to wrest control of the Democratic Party away from its conservative wing. In the early 1960s, they reached the conclusion that black and brown voters would prove key to their own success, so they gradually transitioned toward civil rights organizing in order to build a coalition with the black and brown civil rights movements.

After decades of fighting separately and dabbling in experimental partnerships, veteran ethnic Mexican, African American, and white labor and liberal activists finally came together into a powerful statewide Democratic Coalition. Between 1962 and 1964, their collaborative campaign for civil rights, economic opportunity, and political power reached a fever pitch, resulting in the state’s largest ever direct action protests, massive door-to-door electoral initiatives, and an ever-deepening commitment by labor to putting
boots on the ground for community organizing. In the late 1960s the statewide multiracial coalition reached its apex and began to lose steam. At the same time, local multiracial coalitions continued to thrive, underpinning both the African American and Chicano/a urban electoral mobilizations and the rising Black and Brown Power movements. At the local level and in the short term, black, brown, and white working-class civil rights activists won—they achieved a degree of economic and political democracy in Texas that was scarcely imaginable in the age of Jim Crow just a few decades earlier. But as they won local battles they also lost the larger war.

Working-class civil rights organizers thus failed in the end to democratize Texas and America. Their goals remain distant to this day. Yet they were themselves transformed by their experiences in the struggle. Most transitioned from near-complete political and economic exclusion to having a voice. Their collective story indicates that scholars have much to gain from studying organized labor, electoral politics, and the African American and ethnic Mexican civil rights movements simultaneously. Doing so not only adds to the emerging historical sub-field of black-brown relations but also makes each of the individual movements look different. It reconnects class to the black freedom struggle, militancy to the ethnic Mexican civil rights movement, organized labor to community activism, and all three movements to the creation of today’s urban politics.
Dedication

for Courtney
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Introduction

Sometimes you come in as a stranger. Nobody knows you there and you go, you want to talk... I had in mind to talk to a least a hundred people in that city. And they gave me a day to do it. How you going to talk to a hundred people or fifty people, you know? So, what I did, I just get to the place where you see a white wall and then I, I started showing the film and pass the leaflets. You know, if it is whatever, say Viva Kennedy Clubs or you lo que sea (whatever it was) you know. I says, “Well, the...” you know, “we are going to show the movie here, cartoon, Felix the Cat.” Or the whale or Popeye or whatever. “Bring your parents or your sons. Your kids. Going to show cartoons here.” And then soon as it starts getting dark, you show it on the side of the, of the building or house or the community, inside the house there, whatever... And then you start showing that. And put the music real loud and they start coming in. And you have key chains, necklaces, or whatever, you know, that you have, you know, nickel, ten cents things, you know, to give to the kids. “Go and get your parents. Tell them to come over here. We have something here,” you know. Whatever. And before you know it, you would have a big crowd. And then you would show them the, the cartoon or whatever and then you talk to them about politics. And then give them other stuff that, leaflets or whatever that you need to them. Then show them something else and then come back again with a, with another...¹

This is how it begins. Ordinary people get together and start to talk, and soon they find a way to raise their collective voice. The man speaking is Francisco F. “Pancho” Medrano, a child of Mexican immigrants born in Dallas in 1920. He describes the worst case scenario for a community organizer—to enter a new town knowing absolutely nobody.

But he shares his strategy: project a film, wait for a crowd to form, and then begin to talk politics.

Social movements look different from the perspective of their rank and file participants. Medrano served on the staff of the United Auto Workers (UAW). He was

¹ José Angel Gutiérrez, Oral History Interview with Francisco Medrano, Dallas, June 27, 1996, CMAS 37, Tejano Voices Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries [hereinafter TV-UTA], 91-92.
charged with advancing the union’s political program and joining local struggles “wherever [he] found them.” His name is absent from most accounts of the Chicano Movement in Texas, and it rarely enters the histories of black civil rights. But he played a critical role in both struggles, and he connected them to one another and to electoral politics.

Medrano grew up in the “Little Mexico” barrio of Dallas without electricity or indoor plumbing. He was kicked out of school because he didn’t have shoes, but he caught a break and rode the New Deal into a good industrial job. Still he faced constant discrimination on the shop floor. The crib attendant refused to loan him tools, and white workers objected to being partnered with him for two-man tasks. When an organizer from the United Auto Workers gave Pancho a union constitution that declared its opposition to discrimination based on race, Medrano eagerly joined and helped to sign up his fellow workers. He caught another break when the company set up a boxing ring, as his prowess with his fists earned him a reputation for being a tough union man. He slowly won acceptance on the shop floor and became a steward.

When he left work Pancho combated discrimination in the streets. He participated in a wide range of organizing efforts all over town, often bringing his wife and kids with him. He served as an officer for a chapter of the American G.I. Forum, a Mexican American veterans organization, and joined the board of the local NAACP. In the early 1960s, he aided the sit-in demonstrations of black students at downtown department stores. He alternated between collecting poll taxes for the Progressive Voters League, an African American organization, and various ethnic Mexicans campaigns. In
1964, UAW President Walter Reuther noticed Medrano’s efforts and hired him to work directly for the international union. Armed with union cards, a film projector, and a book of poll tax receipts, Pancho crisscrossed the Southwest campaigning for countless ethnic Mexican candidates and joining in black and brown civil rights struggles wherever he found them, from the fields of Delano, California, to the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama.

Medrano’s life helps to answer several seemingly simple but deceptively complex research questions: What happens when the dominant binary categories used to describe American race relations—either “black and white,” or “Anglo and Mexican”—are examined contemporaneously, not comparatively, but in relation to one another? How do the long African American and Chicano/a struggles for racial equality and economic opportunity look different? And what role did ordinary people play in shaping these movements?

Carrying these questions with me, I dove down a deep rabbit hole in search of the mythical “bottom” so often invoked in narratives of “bottom-up” history. I didn’t quite get there, but I got pretty close. I virtually moved in to the Texas Labor Archives at UT-Arlington. I hit the pavement and interviewed dozens of working-class civil rights activists—black, brown, and white. I dug in my heels at numerous libraries across the state. I identified people like Medrano from Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio and followed them backward and forward in time, from one archive to the next, back to their neighborhoods, into their worksites and union halls, and finally into electoral politics and public policy-making.
Tracing their movements revealed a startling story. Beginning in the mid-1930s, African American and ethnic Mexican working people across Texas quietly and tentatively approached one another as well as white laborers for support in their efforts to counter discrimination at work, in their unions, and in the cities in which they lived. Such collaboration initially took the form of trial and error, and sporadic efforts rarely produced lasting relationships between activists in each racial group. The process of testing one another’s boundaries and reliability as partners continued throughout the 1940s and into the 1950s. Chapter 1 charts the early years of this story, when African Americans and ethnic Mexicans largely worked in isolation from one another as they built powerful local movements that included both labor and civil rights organizing. Chapter 2 follows several of the organizers and nascent multiracial coalitions as they survived and evolved in the midst of the Cold War. Several organizations and activists all but disappeared due to anti-communist repression, and others narrowed their agendas to avoid continued persecution, but most simply redirected their activism into new channels. In one exceptional case, black, brown, and white workers developed a radical alternative that flourished despite the hostility of the era, carrying forward the earlier, more expansive vision and demonstrating how much more was in fact possible for labor and civil rights activists in the 1950s.

By the close of that decade, new forms of multiracial alliances were beginning to take hold. Mutual suspicion slowly gave way to mutual trust. Nowhere was this more true than in San Antonio, where African American and ethnic Mexican activists developed robust civil rights movements that centered on the quest for independent
political power but also encompassed demands for integration and equal economic opportunity. Chapter 3 shows how black and brown organizers each experimented with different tactics and learned from both their victories and mistakes. At the same time, renewed militancy among ethnic Mexican industrial workers and white male craft workers brought those two groups together and linked them to the city’s growing civil rights struggles. The multiracial group of activists in San Antonio began finding ways to cooperate, developing a model for how such partnerships could function in the future.

To my great surprise, these deeper multiracial connections came to fruition in the realm of electoral politics. I began my research, in historian Kevin Boyle’s memorable phrase, “looking for history in very small places.” I had found a few intriguing stories in which quotidian shop-floor interactions among workers of different races and between these workers and their white bosses had revealed some surprising facts about Jim Crow Texas and America. In one case, ethnic Mexican workers allied themselves with black workers in internal union elections; in another, the Mexicanos were not at all concerned with the problems of African Americans. In a third instance, which I later learned to be typical, black longshoremen fought tooth and nail to preserve their segregated local, not because they were nationalists but because they feared losing their independence and power within an integrated but majority-white union. Ethnic Mexicans had their own stevedores’ local too, and all three cooperated but remained distinct.

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I arrived at the Texas Labor Archives eager to find more of these microhistories, thinking that I would piece them together into some greater whole. Poring through the documents of union after union and finally the records of the Texas AFL-CIO and various local labor councils, I struggled to find evidence of the kind I sought. Most grievances filed by black and brown workers had been destroyed before they ever reached the union hall, according to the oral history narrators I interviewed. Page after page, I marveled at how much energy the state labor federation, its affiliates, and the few black and brown workers I had identified all put into politics. Yet I slowly started noticing that the same names were showing up in a wide variety of settings, from labor conventions to mono- and multi-racial political gatherings and eventually, I noticed, in various civil rights struggles.

Finally it hit me: politics was not a detour from the day-to-day, multiracial interactions I had been searching for, but rather it was in the electoral arena in which diverse activists came together first and most consistently. African American, ethnic Mexican, and white liberal activists all desperately needed allies, and they found each other, beginning at the local level. The 1956 election in San Antonio of Albert Peña, the firebrand ethnic Mexican attorney and county commissioner whom one scholar-activist has termed “the dean emeritus of Chicano politics,” signaled the first major triumph of the new, multiracial urban politics. By the mid-1960s, what began as inchoate collaboration at the local level had gradually expanded from its origins in the barrios,

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3 José Angel Gutiérrez, Albert A. Peña, Jr.: Dean Emeritus of Chicano Politics (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, under contract).
ghettos, union halls, and shop floors to become a broad-based, state-wide coalition in support of liberal politicians and an expansive civil rights agenda.

At the same time, African American and ethnic Mexican activists were engaged in new waves of organizing for both political power and civil rights. Surprisingly, both their electoral activities and their direct action protests encountered fierce opposition from members of their own ethnic groups.

In other words, activists’ efforts to forge inter-ethnic coalitions coexisted with protracted intra-ethnic conflict. The black and brown workers and other militant activists in each group advocated an expansive, and enduring, democratic vision. Black working-class civil rights activists demanded not only spatial integration but good jobs, better housing, and quality of life improvements in their neighborhoods. Moreover, their conception of “rights” extended beyond access to include the acquisition of real political and economic power. Ethnic Mexican activists similarly demanded a complete end to racial discrimination at work and in their communities as well as complete independence from bossism and other political intermediaries. Across the board, Chicano/a workers rejected their social betters’ claims of whiteness and calls for assimilation and instead collaborated with African Americans. They did not make what historian Neil Foley calls a “Faustian pact with whiteness”—that is, they did not, as Foley claims, position themselves as whites in order to benefit from the inequalities of segregation against blacks. Rather, they demanded full civil rights as a nonwhite racial minority.

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Yet the black and brown workers and militant civil rights activists who attempted to build bridges with one another and with white laborers were engaged in only one of several competing multiracial alliances—white elite governance also depended upon incorporating the so-called “race leaders” of the African American and Chicano/a communities. In many cases distinctions of class and political philosophy and tactics mattered at least as much as did ties of ethnicity. Activists learned this lesson experientially: in the trenches, through countless small conflicts over several decades, they discovered that they could rely upon allies across ethnic lines more than they could depend on middle-class “race leaders” within their respective groups. Chapter 4 shows how the activists within each group slowly separated themselves from their more conservative counterparts and looked to multiracial coalitions as their primary strategy for outflanking their intra-ethnic opponents.

Both groups understood that they had to do it together. Beginning in 1961, they were joined by the leadership of the Texas AFL-CIO, led by a liberal white man who had helped elect Peña in San Antonio and now committed the entire state’s labor movement to multiracial coalition building. Organized labor had long been the bedrock supporters of the liberal faction of the state’s Democratic Party, the key political battleground in what was then still largely part of the single party Solid South. Like African American and ethnic Mexican community activists, labor and white liberals had been searching for allies in their efforts to wrest control of the party away from its conservative wing. Labor had been sitting on the fence for decades on the issue of civil rights. But as the long African American and Chicano/a freedom struggles picked up steam, labor leaders and
liberals reached the conclusion that black and brown voters would prove key to their own success.

It bears repeating that political struggles were also at the core of the black and brown freedom movements—not a distraction from or a selling out of the “real movement,” as civil rights historians often assume. Just as African American and ethnic Mexican activists demanded equal economic opportunities and sought upward mobility, they organized to win independent political power from the earliest days of their respective movements. The Houston NAACP branch won not only the earliest school desegregation cases but also the nation’s first voting rights suits, ending the white primary in Texas and opening the door for political action. Ethnic Mexicans always had the legal right to vote, but they did not exercise it in large numbers or independently until movement activists organized voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns. Efforts in the electoral arena then bled back over into civil rights demonstrations, and countless rank and file political activists and voters began organizing between elections as well. Chapter 5 shows how veteran ethnic Mexican, African American, and white labor and liberal activists—after decades of fighting separately and dabbling in experimental partnerships—finally came together into a powerful statewide Democratic Coalition. Between 1962 and 1964, their collaborative campaign for civil rights, economic

opportunity, and political power reached a fever pitch, resulting in their largest direct
direct action protests to date, a massive door-to-door electoral initiative, and an ever-deepening
commitment by labor to putting boots on the ground for community organizing.

Understanding the full trajectory of this story required that I find these activists,
listen to them, take their stories seriously, and then seek out additional evidence to
corroborate their accounts. It also required that I consider the spatial dimensions of Jim
Crow in Texas. (Following David Montejano, I use “Jim Crow” to describe the
segregation of ethnic Mexicans as well as African Americans.6) Whatever its name,
racial exclusion shaped nearly every aspect of life for the state’s black and brown
residents. It defined where they lived, where they worked, who they interacted with, and
how they organized. In San Antonio, African Americans were confined to the city’s
Eastside. Ethnic Mexicans lived in the Westside or Southside, while wealthy whites
lived in the Northside. These distinctions became so absolute that contemporary
documents and oral history narrators alike used the geographic designations
interchangeably with their demographics. Eastside was shorthand for black; Westside for
Mexican, and so on. Similarly, South Dallas meant black Dallas, while the Third and
Fifth Wards in Houston also invoked their African American inhabitants. “Little
Mexico” actually became the formal name for the first barrio in Dallas, home to Pancho
Medrano. Thus it shouldn’t be surprising that African Americans and ethnic Mexicans

6 David Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986, 1st ed. (Austin: University of
organized first and foremost separately, in their own neighborhoods, with their own disparate grievances, following their own distinct leaders.\textsuperscript{7}

Efforts to build multiracial coalition first had to overcome these myriad lines of difference, and they only ever did so partially. Civil rights activist and feminist scholar Bernice Johnson Reagon has commented that activists must first have a “house” before they can engage in “coalition.”\textsuperscript{8} That doesn’t imply that collaboration did not or could not run deep. But it did mean that each participant came to coalition efforts with his or her own agenda and in his or her own self-interest, and mutual support only gradually grew to replace mutual distrust. When that transition occurred, the shift took place because of common experiences side-by-side in the trenches of the struggle, not because they shared a preexisting sense of similar histories of oppression.

Across Texas, then, Chicano/a and African American workers and allied activists believed that building multiracial coalitions represented the key to the success of their respective movements. They did so repeatedly throughout the long struggles, demanding not only access but an expansive range of political and economic rights including actual power. By the early 1960s, many white labor leaders agreed, as did leading liberal politicians. Statewide organizing efforts quickly intensified as the white leaders of the Texas AFL-CIO increasingly committed the labor movement to both the Texas Democratic Coalition and the multiracial civil rights struggle.

\textsuperscript{7} The legal framework of Jim Crow also differentiated between African Americans and ethnic Mexicans, as did a million other cultural factors, most importantly religion and language.

Finally, the multiracial coalition that stood at the heart of the movements included countless women in addition to men. Like their male counterparts, working-class women—black, brown, and white—first became active in the 1930s. They participated in and helped lead the upheavals of the 1930s and 1940s, weaving together trade unionism and civil rights. They continued to do so in the 1950s and 1960s, when they also began hitting the streets—together, across racial lines—to campaign for candidates endorsed by the various local and state coalitions. Such work continued to dovetail with civil rights organizing, direct action demonstrations, and labor struggles.

Many “labor feminists” and other women activists held top leadership positions in the coalition and its constituent movements, while many more commanded great but informal authority and were given significant responsibilities in the struggle. In the early 1960s, two women co-directed the statewide multiracial coalition. One white, one black—they were tied together by their decades of experience in organized labor and the long civil rights movements, and they both gained reputations as both fierce combatants and serious organizers of the movement.

Still, gender and sexuality defined their experiences. Women generally won acceptance in male-dominated labor and political circles for two inter-related reasons: because they were married and because their husbands were activists. Most of the women who appear in leadership posts exhibited both of these traits. In contrast, there was virtually no space for single “labor feminists” in the movement. Perhaps married women’s less sexualized status allowed them to be seen as honorary men. For their part, many of the male leaders of the movement—black, brown, and white—engaged in
extramarital affairs or liaisons as they travelled the state. Male oral history narrators
frequently comment on the sexual wanderings of other activist men, and a few readily
admit engaging in such activities themselves.

Unfortunately, it remains unclear what these trends meant to the leading married
women activists in the coalition. Was this a movement for democracy for men only? If
so, why did they actively participate? How did they handle the contradiction inherent in
men who publicly preached equality but lacked it in their own private social relations?
The exact answers to these questions remain elusive, but numerous small episodes
throughout this four-decade history shed some light on their responses.

In the late 1960s the statewide multiracial coalition reached its apex and began to
lose steam. Its roots dated back to the 1930s, and its expansive democratic vision carried
forward into the 1970s. But at no time was it more visible than in 1966, when working
people of all races rallied behind a strike of the United Farm Workers in the Rio Grande
Valley of South Texas. When the Texas Rangers intervened in the conflict, the union set
out on a circuitous 400-mile march from the Valley to the state capitol in Austin. They
left on the Fourth of July and arrived on Labor Day, in early September. U.S. Senator
Ralph Yarborough, the highest ranking Texas liberal, joined them on the final leg and
spoke before a multiracial crowd of thousands. Pickets carried signs calling for a new
minimum wage, recognition for the union, and the advancement of black and brown civil
rights. In fact, a group of African American civil rights activists from “Deep East Texas”
staged their own roundabout march from Huntsville that eventually met up with the
farmworkers in Austin on Labor Day. Meanwhile, black and brown coalitions from
Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio rented buses to bring their members to the rally. Texas had never seen anything like it, and it hasn’t seen anything similar since.

At the same time, local multiracial coalitions continued to thrive, underpinning both the African American and Chicano/a urban electoral mobilizations and the rising Black and Brown Power movements. Many of the activists who led the earlier worksite, community-based, and political struggles helped to direct the War on Poverty. Some joined the civil service, and still others rewrote the rules of local and state elections as litigants, operatives, and candidates. Urban electoral coalitions finally resulted in the election of veteran activists and their allies and signaled the attainment of formal, independent political power—at least at the neighborhood and local level. The coalitions also tied longtime black, brown, and white union and civil rights activists to the youth-led black power and Chicano movements.

At the local level and in the short term, black, brown, and white working-class civil rights activists won—they achieved a degree of economic and political democracy in Texas that was scarcely imaginable in the age of Jim Crow just a few decades earlier. But as they won local battles they also lost the larger war. They failed to win another statewide election after 1964. In the legislature, they changed some of the state’s most glaring Jim Crow laws, but they could not overcome the forces of American cultural nationalism that refused to cede true economic and political democracy. In 1970, Ralph Yarborough lost his seat in the U.S. Senate, stripping the state and local coalitions of their most powerful ally. Liberal Democrats became even more marginal in Texas politics. By almost any measure, inequality along racial and economic lines has increased steadily
since the 1970s. A brief epilogue follows the veteran activists as they participated in the farmworker uprising and returned home to redefine local politics, even as they lost ground at the state and national levels.

Working-class civil rights organizers thus failed in the end to democratize Texas and America. Their goals remain distant to this day. Yet they were themselves transformed by their experiences in the struggle. Most transitioned from near-complete political and economic exclusion to having a voice. Over time, they found like-minded allies within and beyond their ethnic groups. Through a process of trial and error, they developed an expansive vision of social change. Working in multiracial coalitions proved key to their struggle. They did not shy away from engaging in confrontational politics, and they demanded power and equality in addition to a broad range of rights.

This is what the “ordinary people” were doing, as best as the available sources can reveal. Their experiences are not easily explained using the conventional periodization of even the “long” black and brown freedom struggles, nor does a narrow definition of “civil rights” encompass the full range of their political and community organizing.

Rather, their collective story indicates that scholars have much to gain from studying organized labor, electoral politics, and the African American and ethnic Mexican civil rights movements simultaneously. We must move beyond so-called “race leaders” to examine the dialogue among, and overlap between, the on-the-ground organizers of these seemingly divergent struggles. Doing so not only adds to the emerging historical sub-field of black-brown relations but also makes each of the
individual movements look different. It reconnects class to the black freedom struggle, militancy to the ethnic Mexican civil rights movement, organized labor to community activism, and all three movements to the creation of today’s urban politics.

Most importantly, it shows how ordinary people come together to watch a movie, begin to talk about their lives, and end up, in theorist Sheldon Wolin’s words, re-discovering their “politicalness.” All people have the native right to determine one’s own life, Wolin writes, to participate as equals in their political and economic communities and to shape their individual as well as collective futures. This politicalness requires more than periodically voting or staying up to date on current events. Rather, it requires the practice of democracy in all of our social relations including active, daily participation in civic life. Wolin contends that most people in America and worldwide have failed to exercise their politicalness; we have grown complacent by mistaking representation for democracy and by retreating from the public arena. Yet politicalness is each individual’s “birthright,” a latent force within each of us that is waiting to be reclaimed. The right to practice democracy is, as Thomas Jefferson put it, “endowed by [our] creator,” or as the Judeo-Christian tradition suggests, it is passed down from generation to generation beginning with Abraham’s gift to Isaac (and belonging to both Jacob and Esau). The birthright is a product of our humanity, preceding both religion and governments.

We reclaim our birthright of politicalness when we rediscover our own democratic sensibilities, and we do so through collective action. As historian E. P. Thompson wrote, the people need to “see themselves” as being capable of changing the
world before they can make that change a reality. Martin Luther King called the process finding “a sense of somebody-ness.” And it all begins with a simple conversation between organizer and organized, or maybe, a movie projected on a blank wall.⁹

Chapter 1 – The Seeds of the Movement

Prologue

By the early 1930s all vestiges of democratic politics had been exorcised from the civic life of Texas. The state’s founding fathers had withstood both the horrors of Black Reconstruction and the greatest mass movement in American history, an agrarian uprising that engendered a powerful People’s Party that in turned threatened to rewrite the rules that governed the nation’s entire financial system. White terrorism, race baiting, and economic coercion cut the struggle short.\(^1\) A land grab in South Texas then fueled social banditry and plans for another armed revolution, while unrestrained industrial capitalism in East Texas brought black and white timber workers together, at times in collaboration with some of the Populist farmers who had led the revolt a generation before. By the end of World War I these socialist experiments too succumbed to the censorship of their journals in the mail and the imprisonment of their leaders.\(^2\) Even the

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narrowly-focused, lily-white craft union movement that replaced these utopian schemes proved too radical for the business and governing elite of the Lone Star State. Working under the banner of the Texas Open Shop Association, founded in 1919, visionaries among the state’s leading entrepreneurs systematically crushed the trade unions by boycotting any business that was not overtly hostile to organized labor.³

When the dust settled, all that remained was a ghost called the Texas State Federation of Labor and a few distant memories of interracial cooperation and mass revolt. Buffoonery dominated state politics, no more so than when candidate “Ma” Ferguson ran as a surrogate for her previously deposed husband, promising two governors for the price of one and in the end providing the people with none at all.⁴

Politicians praised and made entreaties to the common folk, but the latter did not customarily respond to their appeals. Most stayed home on election day. They didn’t, in the Texas vernacular, “go fishing” because they didn’t like the candidates. Instead, they had long ago lost their franchise—the poll tax passed in 1902 had all but guaranteed that

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⁴ “Pa,” also known as James E. “Farmer Jim” Ferguson, served as governor from 1915 to 1917. He resigned amidst impeachment proceedings and ran again (unsuccessfully) in 1918. He then ran for the U.S. Senate in 1922. Miriam A. “Ma” Ferguson, his wife, ran and won in 1924 and again in 1932. A leading textbook summarizes their career as follows: “Pa” Ferguson’s “personality and politics partially immobilized [Progressive-Era] reform and remained a political issue for more than thirty years... He campaigned in the poorer, agricultural districts, promising to limit the amount of rent that landlords could charge tenant farmers.” When “Ma” ran in 1924, “much of her appeal came from the general understanding that her candidacy for governor was a surrogate campaign for her deposed husband.” All three of the couples terms were noted for their general inefficacy, charges of corruption, and suspect patronage practices (even for that era). See Robert A. Calvert, Arnoldo De León, and Gregg Cantrell, The History of Texas, 4th ed. (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 2007), 296-299, 312-313, and 324-325. On the Texas State Federation of Labor, see Grady Lee Mullennix, “A History of the Texas State Federation of Labor” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1955).
most of them would not participate in the quintessentially American biennial ritual of walking down to the county courthouse, grabbing a leaflet or two from the zealous supporters of one man or another, and dropping a placard or pulling a lever to show their support for the best candidate.

The invention of Jim Crow in the early Twentieth Century added an even more significant obstacle to the practice of democracy in Texas. Even if they had money and went to pay their poll tax in January, black voters were not allowed to vote in the all-important, all-white Democratic primaries of spring and summer, waiting instead until November to choose between the businessman’s Democrat (a lock from 1900 to 1960) and a white Republican. Most African Americans who farmed did so as sharecroppers, but over time these always tenuous ventures increasingly failed, forcing black workers to migrate to the state’s growing cities. In Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, and dozens of smaller urban areas, those who could find work were confined to the dirtiest, lowest-paying, and least-desirable jobs. There were no opportunities for advancement. A handful of ministers, lawyers, doctors, and undertakers gained status within the segregated black neighborhoods, but the independent political power to which their fathers and grandfathers aspired during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age was no longer imaginable. The best that black men who worked with their hands could hope for was a steady job digging ditches or shoveling coal for a railroad or steel foundry, sweeping floors in a factory, trudging through oil fields, or loading cotton by hand into the hulls of cargo ships. A very lucky few sorted or delivered the mail. Many black women worked

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as servants in white households, at times facing the threat of sexual assault by their employers, while many others washed clothes or cooked and cleaned in offices, restaurants, and hotels. The wives of the ministers, lawyers, doctors, and undertakers built churches, schools, sororities, and a wide range of community service clubs and associations. Yet they too could not envision the world that their grandmothers had sought to create.⁶

In South Texas, Jim Crow helped the few Anglo farmers displace the many Tejano ranchers, recasting the region’s longtime inhabitants as “dirty Meskins” unfit for anything but stoop labor and certainly not capable of self-governance. Through the gerrymandering of county lines, the remapping of political jurisdictions, and the consolidation of mass quantities of land, a handful of commercial growers built a series of feudal fiefdoms in which they exercised near-absolute control. Most of their subjects did not vote. Those who did had their poll taxes paid by their foremen, who then piled them into the back of a truck, drove them to the courthouse, and told them how to vote “the right way.” The tejanos of the Nineteenth Century (Texans of Mexican descent) increasingly shared space and rubbed shoulders with thousands of Mexican immigrants who fled the Revolution there in the three decades after 1910 and sought refuge in el norte (literally, the North; figuratively, Texas or America). Many of them wished to return home someday, but many others suspected that the home they knew no longer existed. In the mean time, most traveled from farm to farm working different harvests, and over time their migration took them first to San Antonio and Corpus Christi and later

to the fields of the American Midwest. At times they found casual work in the light industrial concerns of the cities. In most cases, the work of packing fruits, nuts, and vegetables, of turning cotton into textiles, or of sewing cheap clothes remained reserved for “Meskin” women, workers that employers believed would work hard, not complain, and in any event accept pay scales far below those which could be offered to anyone else. Many ethnic Mexican men and women in the cities found the same dirty, low-paying jobs that were available to their African American counterparts. As in the black community, a few *mexicano* professionals gained prominence in the *barrios*, and in some cases they served as intermediaries between the working masses and the urban allies of the old feudal bosses. Some of the immigrants still longed for Revolution, and they hoped to recreate it in their new, if temporary, home. But most who resisted the South Texas version of Jim Crow encountered some combination of imprisonment, deportation, and violent attack at the hands of the Texas Rangers.\(^7\)

Hard times were not new for the multiracial working-class majority of Jim Crow Texas. The onset of the Great Depression may have made hard times even harder, but it was the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the long reach of the New Deal that first cracked the state’s white supremacist edifice. The fracture itself did not threaten the sturdy foundation of Dixiecrat power in Texas; in fact, the “establishment” in the Lone Star State exceeded most of their Southern brethren in thwarting the President’s initiatives at nearly every turn. Yet poor Texans seized the opening created by the New

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Deal, and just as water seeps into a crack and slowly but inexorably causes the bricks to split, they began to chip away at the rock of Jim Crow.

They did so by teaching themselves that mass organization was possible.

It proved to be a difficult lesson to learn. In Dallas, labor and radical political activists ran headfirst into the full might of America’s leading corporations, an explosive conflict that nonetheless failed to prevent the spread of industrial unionism in the city. Soon after in San Antonio, workers at the bottom of the economy built a mass movement that withstood fierce repression and temporarily overthrew a powerful decades-old political machine, only to crest and wilt under assault from conservative reactionaries. And in Houston’s Fifth and Third Wards, men and women who had grown up amidst a terrible race riot found new opportunities in the factories that accompanied the oil boom, and they translated their experiences on the shop floor into a powerful civil rights movement that in turn forced a permanent realignment of electoral politics in Texas. Few of the working-class activists in these struggles emerged from them completely unscathed, but the organizing skills they acquired in the process ultimately lasted longer and cut deeper than their wounds.

“‘We Don’t Want Any Reds in Dallas!’”

A decade and a half after the entrepreneurs of Texas methodically crushed craft unionism, the business elites of 1930s Dallas charted a remarkably similar response to the new threat posed by a reinvigorated industrial labor movement in Texas. Led by the Ford
Motor Company and egged on by the *Dallas Morning News*, they systematically implemented a broad campaign against all union and leftist organizing activities in Big D.

One of the outside agitators that caught their attention was a young white man named George Lambert. Born in Bluefield in West Virginia’s coal country in 1913, Lambert became a Socialist, a unionist, and a pacifist while working his way through school at the state’s flagship university. A professor had introduced him to the Young People’s Socialist League and the Student League for Industrial Democracy, both of which pushed him into the Socialist Party led by Norman Thomas. He spent the summer of 1934 working in a nearby garment factory, but he got fired along with several of his co-workers after they contacted a union organizer. The union got Lambert a job in a coal mine, where he joined the United Mine Workers (UMW) and remained for the rest of the summer. Soon after, he visited a picket line of women who were striking another garment factory, and he drew inspiration from their commitment. More than twenty-five years later he still vividly recalled the women “throwing themselves in the mud to keep trucks from going in to pick up the goods.” Lambert next tagged along with a UMW staffer as the union tried to reorganize the coalfields of northern West Virginia, but his formal schooling hit an unexpected roadblock when he was expelled for refusing to take classes in the Reserved Officer Training Corps (ROTC). Fortunately for Lambert, the Quaker-affiliated Guilford College in North Carolina stepped in to offer him a scholarship to continue his education.8

8 George Lambert, interview by George N. Green, September 9, 1971 (Part I) & February 6, 1972 (Part II), Dallas, Texas, Texas Labor Archives, Special Collections, The University of Texas at Arlington Library [hereinafter TLA-UTA], OH 19, Part I, 1-5; “Longtime Labor Leader George Lambert Dies,” *Dallas
Lambert arrived in the Tar Heel State in 1935, but the labor movement and the Socialist Party continued to pull him away from school. He frequently left school to attend meetings with textile workers who were still reeling from the disastrous industry-wide strike the previous year. A single organizer for the Textile Workers Organizing Committee (TWOC), one of dozens a year earlier, was now responsible for the entire state, so he gladly assigned several cities to the eager young Lambert. Near Durham, Lambert later remembered, a group of “people obviously connected with the mill owners” pulled him and his collaborators off the train platform and put them in jail overnight. In Greenville, the gates at Cone Mills were still adorned with mounts for machine guns. Surviving jail and confronting violent repression intrigued rather than rebuffed the young activist. He later recalls, “Then I got so interested in the labor movement, I lost interest in getting a college degree.”

At the same time, Lambert became more active than ever in the Socialist Party, an avocation that took him to Tennessee, Arkansas, and Georgia, where he gained his first personal exposure to the struggle against Jim Crow. In 1936, he helped coordinate the gubernatorial campaign of Kate Bradford Stockton, one of a handful of Tennessee “‘mountain socialists’” and host for the first short-lived site of the Highlander Folk School. He traveled the state along with various socialist organizers, including H. L.

_Craftsman_ 61, no. 12, August 23, 1974, 1, in George and Latane Lambert Papers, AR127, Box 4, Folder 6, TLA-UTA.


10 Lambert interview, Part I, 8-9. The phrase “mountain socialists” belongs to Myles Horton. See W. Calvin Dickinson, _Rural Life and Culture in the Upper Cumberland_ (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), chap. 12; quotation on 216; Lambert’s name appears on 224. Also see Rebecca Vial,
Mitchell, the head of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU). It was with Mitchell that Lambert attended some of his first interracial meetings. He later remembered marveling at the courage of black STFU supporters who attended a Socialist Party rally on the courthouse steps in Earl, Arkansas, despite the presence of deputy sheriffs who were known for pressing black dissidents into service as convict laborers.11 After the campaign ended, late in 1936, Lambert traveled to Atlanta to support a sit-down strike by auto workers one month before the famous sit-in in Flint, Michigan. As a red Socialist sound truck rolled around town blaring the “Internationale,” Lambert courted a wide range of community organizations for support. In this capacity he attended his first integrated luncheons and dinners at Morehouse College and quickly became a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A brief stint organizing textile workers took him back to Tennessee before the Party asked him to go to Texas in the summer of 1937.12

By that time, Ford remained the lone non-union holdout among the Big Three American automakers. The United Auto Workers (UAW) sit-down strike in Flint in 1936-37 had brought General Motors to its knees and under a collective bargaining agreement, and Chrysler quickly flinched and recognized the union in order to avoid a strike. Ford’s small plant in East Dallas probably did not figure prominently in the firm’s strategy to combat the influence of organized labor at its larger factories in and around

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11 Lambert interview, Part I, 10-12. Lambert adds that Victor Reuther, later a top officer in the United Auto Workers, spoke as a proxy for the Socialist vice-presidential candidate at the rally.
Detroit. Still, company officials in Dallas—like their counterparts across the country—quickly enlisted a goon squad of hundreds of men to intimidate, harass, and when all else failed, beat the tar out of any and all subversives in town. The latter group included both the outside agitators they thought were fanning the flames of discontent and the local people who sympathized with them. Rather than combating the unionization campaign solely on the shop floor, Ford leaders in Dallas worked to preserve the open shop city-wide by keeping all labor and anyone with even the slightest tinge of red on the defensive.  

Lambert learned about the Ford goon squads firsthand, in the same manner as many other labor and left activists in Big D. In early August, 1937, Lambert, Herb Harris, another Socialist organizer; and Carl Brannin, a leader of the Texas Party, had begun screening political films at various venues around town, and an event at City Hall ended without incident. A few days later Brannin circulated flyers at the South Texas Cotton Mill for a double-feature in a park across the street. The agenda included Pierre Lorentz’s “The Plow that Broke the Plains,” followed by “Millions of Us,” a socialist propaganda piece that included the organizational pitch. Lambert grew nervous as a number of “big husky fellows” who were “obviously not textile workers” began to gather around them in the park. As Harris loaded the second film, Lambert remembers, “somebody shouted, ‘Get the goddam Communists. We don’t want any reds in Dallas!’” Lambert was beaten until unconscious; Brannin managed to escape. The thugs

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kidnapped Harris, beat him, coated him with a tar-like substance obtained at the Ford plant, and rolled him in feathers. Then they deposited him in an alley behind the *Dallas Morning News*. Photographers from the paper, whom they had already tipped off, waited with readied cameras to take the pictures, one of which ran the next day. Even the city police department had previously agreed not to interfere with the Ford goon squads!  

Such was the atmosphere for organizing in Dallas in that long, hot, and mostly forgotten summer. Lambert’s film screening had no connection to the Ford plant, and the organizers had no Communists in their ranks. Still, local Ford management, with help from Detroit, offered a handful of workers lucrative jobs in the “outside squad,” specializing in roaming around town beating down all labor and leftist efforts. Hundreds of other Ford workers were forced to join the “inside squads,” which normally were confined to spying on their colleagues within the plant, except on special occasions like the exhibition in the park, which required more muscle. Those that hesitated to participate were threatened with losing their jobs.  

But the real power lay not in the half of the working class that Ford hired to kill the other half, to paraphrase the poetic words of robber baron Jay Gould. Rather, merchants and industrialists across Dallas continued to coordinate their actions through

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15 “The Dallas Ford Case,” 4-5, uses the terms “outside” and “inside.” Lambert interview, Part II, 11-12. Lambert also notes that Ford coerced workers into participating in the goon squads. He recalls that Ford required all employees to be present at another UAW rally at a park in South Dallas “as a condition of their employment.” A union organizer remarked to Lambert that it “looks like the whole Ford factory is out here,” and the two men fled before another attack could take place.  
the Dallas Open Shop Association (DOSA), the local unit left over from the 1920s anti-labor offensive. It shared what Lambert called “an interlocking directorate” with the Dallas Chamber of Commerce, which in turn dominated local politics. The Chamber made appeals to outside industry by claiming that it was free from the labor agitation that plagued the Northeast and West Coast. For its part, the DOSA threatened to levy a $3,000 fine against any member business that knowingly hired a card-carrying union worker.¹⁷

Nonetheless, Dallas was not free from labor organizing but riddled with it. Two years earlier, in 1935, white, black, and ethnic Mexican women joined the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) and went on strike at all thirteen garment factories in the city. Approximately forty percent of the industry’s workers voted overwhelmingly to walk off the job in protest of “sweatshop-like conditions” in the plants as well as their employers’ violations of the industry wage and hour codes established by the New Deal’s National Recovery Administration (NRA). When employers hired replacement workers during the industry’s all-important “Market Week,” the union maids confronted the scabs on the street and stripped off the latter women’s clothes using pin hooks, a small blade attached to a thumb ring that was a mainstay of the seamstresses’ craft. The spectacle “stripping party” represented a declaration of independence for Dallas’ long-invisible working women, a feat that earned not just local media coverage but also international publicity. It also earned the unionists $25 fines and three days in jail. A “don’t buy” campaign promoted by the Texas State Federation of Labor and

¹⁷ Lambert interview, Part II, 8; Lambert, “Dallas Tries Terror,” 377.
Dallas Central Labor Council, the state and local umbrella groups affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), failed to significantly bolster the union’s cause, and the conflict ended quietly and unsuccessfully nine months after it began. Making good on their pledge to the DOSA, the garment manufacturers blacklisted the strikers, leaving them unable to find work again in Dallas.  

Such repression, combined with the weakness of local AFL unions, conferred upon Dallas the reputation “in trade union circles” of “the worst open-shop center in the United States.” By 1937, the Ford Motor Company and DOSA clearly hoped to preserve this hard-won reputation, whatever the human cost. Just a day or two before the attack on Lambert in the park, a local owner of a millinery shop (hat factory) named Mike Bierner called Ford managers to ask for help with his own labor problem. Members of the “outside squad” kidnapped union organizer and vice-president Max Baer and beat him nearly beyond recognition—until one of his eyes hung out—before throwing him into a field to die. A passing motorist found Baer and took him to a hospital, where he remained unconscious for nearly two weeks but managed to survive. The goon squads beat more than fifty workers that summer, some of them union supporters, others leftist political activists, and still others caught in the crossfire. The staged newspaper image of Herb Harris’ tarred-and-feathered body conclusively drove the message home.

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In the end, the Chamber of Commerce’s campaign of terror succeeded in stifling the efforts of countless labor and political activists, but it did not, ironically, prevent the unionization of the Ford plant. Management disbanded the “outside squad” late in 1937 and ended the “inside” espionage program in 1938. Yet with the union scare over, the company either fired the former thugs or forced them back into their old jobs—and old pay scales. Consequently, in 1940, many of the former goons cooperated with investigators from the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which held a widely-publicized hearing on the violence that ended in a stern ruling condemning Ford’s anti-union activities. The UAW had a contract by 1941.21

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Blacklisting and beatings aside, the labor movement was on the march—even in the open shop stronghold of Dallas. While the NRA had failed to protect the striking garment workers, the passage of the National Labor Relations Act (or Wagner Act) in 1935 enabled the federal government for the first time to directly intervene in private industrial conflicts. The Wagner Act created the NLRB, the first federal agency with the necessary teeth to force companies like Ford to refrain from intimidating its workers in order to prevent unionization. The Board’s early willingness to support working people and to end Dallas-style firings and beatings clearly represented a New Deal for working people in Texas—at least for those who were fortunate enough to hold formal jobs in

21 “The Dallas Ford Case,” 8. Written in 1960, “The Dallas Ford Case” cites the 78-page NLRB decision, published in Vol. 26 of “Decisions and Orders of the National Labor Relations Board.” For more information, see the Ford Motor Company, Dallas, Texas Collection, AR89, TLA-UTA, which includes “Transcripts of court cases, newspaper clippings, pamphlets, and photocopied articles [and] .... transcript of v. 2-5 of Case 9679 brought to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals by the NLRB against Ford Motor Company.”
private industry. (Unfortunately for everyone else, the Wagner Act, like the Social Security Act and other New Deal legislation, categorically excluded agricultural laborers, domestic servants, and public employees, effectively and intentionally limiting its reach among working women and people of color.)\(^{22}\)

Such inequities notwithstanding, the federal government’s newfound support for working people and the labor movement created a sense of optimism and authority for organizers who sought to democratize Texas and America. George Lambert aptly recalled the mood of the times, invoking a frequently repeated line of union activists in the 1930s: “‘Boys, the President wants you to organize.’”\(^{23}\) For a brief moment, working people in Dallas and throughout Texas heeded the call. The Dallas Open Shop Association could no longer punish its members for signing a union contract. Workers increasingly took the risky steps of talking to one another and to “outside agitators” like Lambert. Labor had come to stay.

For his part, after facing the Ford goons in Dallas, Lambert soon moved to Houston, where he continued to campaign for the Socialist Party and worked part-time for the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. In December 1937, local labor leaders, led by the newborn steel and oil unions, applied for a charter for the Texas Federation of CIO Unions, the new state umbrella group affiliated with the national Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO). Lambert helped build the steel workers local at the Hughes Tool Company and other plants and got to know the officers of the new state


\(^{23}\) Lambert interview, Part I, 2.
federation. In early February, 1938, they asked him to go to San Antonio in order to conduct a brief investigation into what they thought was a minor disturbance in San Antonio. They expected his return within two days, but history had other plans.24

“A Mass Uprising” in San Antonio

Across the nation the nascent grassroots labor movement—encouraged by the newly-activist federal government—opened the door for hundreds of experiments in mass organization among the disenfranchised. In most cases, workers plunged through the threshold and confronted their bosses with a deceptively simple demand: an acknowledgement of their right to bargain collectively. Their desire to make their voices heard at work fundamentally challenged the existing power relations in American industry. Occasionally, the unity forged on the shop floor also translated into heightened levels of cooperation in other community affairs, including electoral politics.

In San Antonio, “the cradle of Texas liberty,” quiet organizing among a handful of transitory workers at the bottom of the state’s economy quickly transformed into first an industry-wide general strike and then a mass uprising that successfully seized control of local government. Over 10,000 men and women took to the streets of the Alamo City, and over one thousand workers filled its jails. When the boss finally caved to the

strikers’ demands after thirty-seven days, as many as 25,000 people attended a victory dance. Texas had never seen anything like it.

The basic facts of the great San Antonio pecan sheller strike are well-known by historians of labor and the Chicano/a experience. The predominately ethnic Mexican pecan shellers, or nueceros, first struck in 1934, but the industry recognized only a company union at the conclusion of the strike. After the CIO-affiliated United Cannery, Agricultural, Packinghouse, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) chartered a local in San Antonio in late 1937, the organizing effort stalled, attracting less than one hundred members. In January 1938, UCAPAWA re-assigned organizers James and Manuela Solis Sager from the onion fields of the Rio Grande Valley to San Antonio, where the couple made contact with Emma Tenayuca, a leader of the city’s Communist-affiliated Unemployed Councils and the Workers’ Alliance of America. According to historian Zaragosa Vargas, under Tenayuca’s direction, the Workers’ Alliance had grown to include fifteen branches with over three thousand members by the time the UCAPAWA organizers arrived. Tenayuca had personally learned the power and limitations of collective action by participating in strikes of cigar and garment workers in

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1933 and 1934, and the organization she now directed had drawn strength from repeated sit-ins and other protests against local officials’ systematic exclusion of ethnic Mexicans from many New Deal relief programs since 1935. The recession of 1937, an early frost in the Valley that displaced countless farm workers and brought them to San Antonio, a reduction in the relief rolls, and a sharp wage cut by “Pecan King” Julius Seligmann (whose Southern Pecan Company dominated the industry) all precipitated the mass strike. On January 31, 1938, Vargas writes, 6,000 to 8,000 nueceros working in 170 different packing sheds walked off the job. As many as 3,000 were members of the Workers’ Alliance. The rest followed their lead and joined the union en masse, exponentially swelling the membership of UCAPAWA’s Local 172 but still electing Tenayuca as the “honorary strike leader.”

Scholarly accounts of what happened next focus on Tenayuca’s charismatic leadership and radical philosophy, the repression of the strikers at the hands of city law enforcement, and the rapid decline of the industry following the workers’ heroic but ultimately pyrrhic victory. Most of the packing sheds closed their doors immediately, and only a handful remained open and faced active picketing by the union. Thousands of workers gathered each evening in vacant lots near the job sites, where they listened to the fiery oratory of Tenayuca and other speakers, including her then-husband Homer Brooks, the head of the Communist Party (CP) in Texas. Vargas and other historians argue that Tenayuca’s interest in the CP represented the logical progression of her interest in advancing the raza, the collective interest of ethnic Mexicans (literally “race” or

26 Vargas, “Tejana Radical,” 559-567 (quote on 567).
“people”), rather than dogmatic allegiance to the Soviet Union or the Party’s platform. Still, her speeches not only inveighed against the pecan bosses but also spoke more generally to themes of widespread class and racial conflict. During the strike, Tenayuca and Brooks also found time to pen a path-breaking treatise that helped define the national party’s position acknowledging the unique national liberation struggle of ethnic Mexicans living in the United States.27

Meanwhile, the duo, joined by many other organizers and countless rank and file activists among the pecan shellers, spent the majority of their time facing down beatings, tear gassings, and imprisonment at the hands of local law enforcement officers, who did their best to fill the jails with ordinary mexicano/a workers. More than three hundred were arrested on a single day! Images of formerly peaceful pickets being bludgeoned and gassed combined with the very real possibility that the strikers would return the violence eventually compelled Governor James V. Allred, a New Dealer, to send the state industrial commission to investigate the conflict. Finally Allred personally persuaded Seligmann, the head of the employers association, and the union to submit to arbitration that finally settled the strike.

Yet soon after the huge dance party celebrating their victory, the workers faced a new challenge. They had achieved their goals of union recognition and increased wages only to see the industry begin hemorrhaging its workforce. The passage of the federal minimum wage yet again boosted the income of those that remained, but ironically it cut

so deeply into the industry’s profits that the union joined the employers in asking the U. S. Department of Labor for an exemption from the new law. When their request failed, the pecan manufacturers responded by completing the process of mechanization and further reducing its need for labor by hand. Mass automation accomplished what brute police force could not—it busted the union and sent the ethnic Mexican workers home from the steps of City Hall and back into relative obscurity in the all-Mexican enclave of San Antonio’s West Side. From more than 6,000 members at the height of the strike, Local 172 could claim fewer than 800 by 1940, just two years later, and less than one hundred by the end of World War II.\footnote{Gower, “Unintended Consequences,” 99; Filewood, “Tejano Revolt,” 119-120.}

The extant scholarly narratives of the “great pecan sheller strike of 1938,” in short, highlight its radical origins, brief triumph, and abrupt, tragic decline. The workers won the battle but decisively lost the war. At the end of the day, those in power remained in power, while those courageous, impoverished workers backslid from under- to unemployed. Order was restored.

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Yet in truth it was not the same arrangement of power but a strikingly new one that remained. The conflict rattled to the core the city political machine headed by Mayor C. K. Quin, making plain the fact that his old coalition had collapsed and now vied with newly-forged alliances between the large working-class ethnic Mexican population and liberal elements within San Antonio’s white and black communities. At the same time, many of the participants in the thirty-seven day conflict returned to work transformed by
it. They had witnessed firsthand the power of their own solidarity and the surprising impotence of elite control—even rampant police brutality had failed to turn the tide against them. They had participated in the creation of a bona fide social movement, and even that movement’s destruction would not erase what they had learned in the process.

When viewed against the long trajectory of labor and civil rights struggles in Texas, then, the fight of the nueceros looks less like a flash in the pan and more like a community-based mass movement that not only raised the expectations and political capacity of its direct participants but also contributed to the broader development of democratic organizing traditions among the state’s disenfranchised majority. In so doing, it fundamentally reorganized the contours of both local and state politics.

Oral sources and individual anecdotes prove critical to understanding the larger significance of the pecan sheller movement. For example, Alberta Zepeda Snid’s testimony details her own family’s history but also speaks to common experiences that would have found parallels among countless other ethnic Mexicans in San Antonio. Interviewed in 1979 by members of the People’s History in Texas project, Snid remembers traveling to the sugar beet fields of Michigan and following the cotton harvest across Texas throughout her childhood. Her parents emigrated from Mexico’s northern mining region shortly before she was born in April 1919, and throughout the 1920s and 30s the family migrated along with the crops. The Zepedas made their permanent home in San Antonio’s West Side barrio, a four square mile enclave that swelled until two-thirds of the city’s 100,000 ethnic Mexican residents crowded into its substandard housing by the time of the strike. Like many of their neighbors, the Zepedas felt the sting
of the Great Depression, when the few job opportunities they previously depended upon became even fewer. Local relief officials typically denied assistance to ethnic Mexicans. So like many migrant farm workers, the Zepedas augmented their meager income by spending the winter months working in the pecan sheds. Initially, the occupation was dominated by women, but men like Snid’s father joined their ranks as they became increasingly desperate for work. Whole families sat side by side on wooden benches in rustic sheds that held fifty, sixty, or as many as two hundred workers. The work was dirty, strenuous, and barely compensated.\textsuperscript{29} Still, approximately 12,000 mostly ethnic Mexican workers labored in more than one hundred such sheds by January 1938. Many more likely dabbled in the trade, while still others cracked the shells in their homes.\textsuperscript{30}

Snid, who was eighteen when the strike began, does not remember exactly how it started, but she does recall that it was her mother who took an immediate interest in the union and subsequently brought the rest of the family into the movement. Unlike many labor disputes, the pecan sheller strike did not feature an internal union structure that mirrored the organization of the industry. Rather than identifying and appointing rank and file leaders on each shift in each shed, UCAPAWA organized by neighborhood and block, grafting the union on top the networks that had the Workers’ Alliance had already established. Mrs. Zepeda became first a block captain and then the vice-president of her neighborhood council, the key building block of the Alliance, the union, and the larger

\textsuperscript{29} Alberta Snid, interview by Glenn Scott and María Flores, 1979, OH 116N, TLA-UTA [probably in San Antonio], 1-8. The interviewers were affiliated with People’s History in Texas, Inc., a non-profit organization, and portions of Snid’s interview appear in the film produced by PHIT: Scott and Flores, \textit{Talkin’ Union}.

\textsuperscript{30} Filewood, “Tejano Revolt,” 44-64.
pecan sheller movement. Her husband, Snid’s father, was initially hesitant to support the strike, but Mrs. Zepeda brought the entire family to the picket lines and to the mass outdoor meetings at Cassiano Park on Zarzamora & Laredo streets. Mr. Zepeda soon joined the effort, inspired particularly by Tenayuca and the ongoing local CP meetings. Mrs. Zepeda became a leader of the local union. The entire family spent time in jail during the conflict.  

For her part, in addition to watching and learning from her parents’ passion for the cause, Snid credits the conflict with raising her own political consciousness. She remembers interacting with the CP officials, other ethnic Mexican leaders from the Workers’ Alliance, and a number of white UCAPAWA organizers. “We learned that through organization we could do something,” she recalls.

Maybe we didn’t win that much as far as money was concerned, but we learned that being united is power regardless. It is power. A single person cannot do anything. Alone we could not do anything. People are power. Yes, I think we learned a whole lot. I think we learned how to even defend ourselves more. I think we forgot a little bit of the fear that we had, because we couldn’t say nothing, we couldn’t talk, period. Afterwards it was entirely different.

Block-by-block, neighbor-by-neighbor, the pecan shellers of San Antonio formed an organization deeply rooted in the West Side barrio. Women like Mrs. Zepeda were its on-the-ground leaders.

Snid is not alone nor was she overly romantic in remembering the high stakes of the conflict. Telesforo Oviedo, the president of the strike committee, spoke in similarly grandiose terms in a contemporary Spanish-language newspaper account: “It is inexact to

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31 Snid interview, 3, 9-11, 14-16, 19-20.
say that the workers’ movement is headed by communists. Senora Emma Tenayuca Brooks, who is accused of being a communist by [Police Chief Owen] Kilday, is not the only one responsible for the movement . . . up to now the police have tried to break up the strike, but the strike committee has decided to continue with the worker movement.”

Likewise, mainstream newspaper coverage of Kilday’s actions and statements, often interpreted by scholars as exaggerated, untruthful, or sheer cynical red-baiting, appear surprisingly in step with the pronouncements of the ordinary non-Communist strikers. On the evening of the first walkout, the San Antonio Light declared, “So serious did Chief Kilday consider the situation that he mobilized 150 officers for riot duty and stationed radio squads, armed with riot guns and tear bombs, at strategic points on the West Side, where most of the factories are located.” Or, in Kilday’s own words, under oath at a hearing six weeks later in which the union unsuccessfully sought an injunction against the Police Department: “‘I did not interfere with the strike. I interfered with a revolution.’”

For the remainder of the strike, the San Antonio Express often carried similar statements in which Kilday linked “revolution” to the “communistic” strike.

Kilday certainly engaged in hyperbole. Still, his statements should not be understood as

33 “Reclaman la Restitucion de los Salarios de 6 y 7 Cents. por Libra de Nuez Limpiada,” La Prensa, 5 February 1938, p. 1, quoted in Filewood, “Tejano Revolt,” 100.
34 “Pecan Plant Workers Strike,” San Antonio Light, 31 January 1938. This article, an excerpt of the Snid interview, and more than a dozen additional documents are collected online in Thomas Dublin, Taina DelValle, and Rosalyn Perez, “How Did Mexican Working Women Assert Their Labor and Constitutional Rights in the 1938 San Antonio Pecan Shellers Strike?,” Binghamton, NY: State University of New York at Binghamton, Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1999, no. 2.
36 See, for example, San Antonio Express, February 26, 1938.
mere bugaboo but as a measure of the city government’s serious assessment of the potential threat posed by the pecan sheller uprising.

Organizer George Lambert’s memory of the San Antonio struggle also highlights its mass movement nature while foregrounding the larger political implications of the conflict. When the pecan shellers walked off the job, Lambert arrived to conduct his investigation but never reported back. Instead, he got a temporary position with the UCAPAWA and took charge of the union’s public relations for the strike. In this capacity he participated in private strategy meetings with Tenayuca and Brooks, international union president Donald Henderson, and countless rank and file activists. As a committed Socialist, Lambert disagreed with many Communist Party officials, but such ideological divisions did not hamper his ability to work with the strike’s leaders. Rather, he recalls, “The only reason that [Tenayuca] identified herself as a Communist was because as far as she could see there was nobody else in this country who were in the least interested in doing anything about the economic situation on the West Side of San Antonio or among the Mexican-Americans in those days… [H]er interests were with the people there.”

Likewise, the strike was not “a completely Communist-run thing and was worthwhile in terms of the good that would come out of it for the pecan shellers, whether or not the Communists had anything to do with it. Basically it was just a trade union operation.”

Still, such broad agreement across ideological lines masked the fact that on the ground, this was clearly no ordinary trade union strike—a fact Lambert quickly

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37 Lambert interview, part II, 15-19 (quotation on 19).
38 Lambert interview, part II, 23.
discovered when he hit the streets in San Antonio. Nightly strike meetings, on some occasions held at two or three locations simultaneously across the West Side, included crowds that “numbered in the hundreds and sometimes thousands” and spilled out into the sidewalks and streets—where the police frequently waited outside to arrest them for obstructing the right-of-way or for gathering illegally. Lambert lost track of how many times he was taken to jail, but he recalls being “picked up twice for having blocked the sidewalk where there wasn’t a sidewalk and had never been a sidewalk…and there [is] still no sidewalk.” When the jails would overflow, the police took strikers fifteen to twenty miles outside of town, dropped them off, and made them walk home.39

What separated the pecan sheller conflict was not the repression, however, but the stakes and participants. Lambert’s testimony is worth quoting at length:

I think it wasn’t the fact of a strike in itself. The pecan shelling industry wasn’t that important economically or any other way to San Antonio except that it provided the barest subsistence living to the migratory farm workers, who came in and shelled pecans for Seligmann in the winter months. But it had at its inception taken on the aspect of a mass uprising among the Mexican-Americans in the entire West Side of San Antonio, and it was being participated in actively by hundreds and perhaps thousands who didn’t themselves make a living in the pecan industry. I knew a number of people who were associated with that strike that had no trade union orientation, certainly didn’t have any Communist or Socialist Party orientation. They were not interested in anything except improving on the poor conditions on the West Side…

I remember one guy by the name of Cisneros who had a large family, and he worked the beet fields in Michigan every summer, but he had several good years; he had a big car [and] his family didn’t have to work during the winter. They had no connection at all with the pecan shelling industry…He was taking a most active part transporting people and providing protection. He was a tough-looking hombre—big scar on his face and a big man, providing protection for Emma Tenayucca [sic].

39 Lambert interview, part II, 19-24 (quotation on 24); Snid interview, 15; Filewood, “Tejano Revolt,” 95.
Friends of his, some of them, had WPA [Works Progress Administration] jobs. A WPA job made you middle class. In fact, this made you relatively upper middle class…in those days on the West Side of San Antonio. There were a lot of the WPA workers who were making the meetings at nights and came around to do chores for the strike on the weekend…40

Clearly the movement had transcended the usual confines of labor-management relations. From relatively well-off migrants to WPA workers to the poorest of the poor pecan shellers, there were few people on the West Side who did not actively participate in the uprising.

One group was conspicuously absent: the Mexican American upper class. Lambert recalls that a variety of ethnic Mexican organizations donated the use of their halls to the union, as did many of the sympathetic pecan shed operators who worked under contract for Seligmann. But the local chapters of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the state’s largest ethnic Mexican civil rights organization, did not. In fact, many of its leaders joined the police department, the machine at city hall, the Mexican Chamber of Commerce, and the Catholic Church in publicly opposing the strike, claiming that it was dominated by Communists. Their allegations, which extended beyond Tenayuca and Brooks to include Henderson and numerous UCAPAWA organizers, were not entirely without merit. Yet as the observations of Snid, Oviedo, Lambert, and even Chief Kilday make plain, tens of thousands of the city’s ethnic Mexican residents overlooked the red menace and flocked to the fight against the racial division of labor and the poverty it produced. Meanwhile, instead of joining the workers struggle, the small group of professionals who appointed themselves leaders of the raza

40 Lambert interview, part II, 24-25.
staged their own mass meeting at Cassiano Park. There they asked the workers “to divorce themselves from their ‘Communistic leaders’” and attempted to form a separate anti-Communist pecan sheller union. Their efforts failed, and they watched helplessly as the workers passed them by, sticking to the UCAPAWA and the larger movement.41

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The class divide among ethnic Mexicans was not an aberration but rather an indication of the new fault lines either created or exacerbated by the mass uprising. Rebuffed by their social betters, leaders of the working-class movement wasted little time in searching elsewhere for support. They found it in their U. S. Congressman, Fontaine Maury Maverick, Sr. “Maury,” as he was popularly known, was the grandson of Samuel Augustus Maverick, a participant in the Texas independence convention of 1836, successful cattle rancher, leader of the annexation and then secession political movements, and diehard Confederate and opponent of Reconstruction until he died in 1870. A slur describing an unbranded calf from his always-wandering herd is credited with creating the term “maverick,” while his political exploits likely added to its iconoclastic meaning.42 In any event, grandson Maury’s inheritance may have given him an independent streak, but it did not predispose him to liberal causes.

Nonetheless Maverick’s election to a new Congressional district in 1934 “cracked the San Antonio machine” and its decades-long reign for the first time. According to a


pamphlet published by the Texas Civil Liberties Union (TCLU) soon after the pecan
sheller strike, the city’s machine traditionally “had no colorful boss at the head.” Instead,
“a composite bossism made up of the city’s commissioners” had long perpetuated itself
by winning the support of Anglo businessmen, “the vice and gambling element vote [and]
a portion of the middle class vote.” Charles Bellinger, the leading African American
entrepreneur in the fields of vice and gambling, “delivered the Negro vote in a block. . .
in return for concessions” including public works projects, jobs, and other patronage.
Meanwhile, the “Latin American[s], their vote not organized and therefore receiving no
concessions,” sold their votes individually for the remaining crumbs and thereby also
“had their votes regularly delivered.” The result was “a machine known far and wide to
be reeking with graft and corruption” that was abnormally “certain of its tenure. Then
came Maury Maverick.”43

When he arrived in Washington in 1935, Maverick, in the words of his
biographer, “attracted national attention as the organizer of a group of ‘maverick’
congressmen who tried to ‘out-New Deal’ the New Deal.” He helped pass the Patman
Bonus Bill, neutrality legislation, and new federal support for local public utilities. At
the same time, he distinguished himself as a stalwart supporter of civil liberties.44 At
home in San Antonio, he publicly supported the unionization efforts of the mostly ethnic
Mexican women cigar and garment workers and championed New Deal relief efforts.

43 “San Antonio: The Cradle and the Coffin of Texas Liberty” (Austin: Texas Civil Liberties Union, 1938),
Texas AFL-CIO Miscellany Collection, AR413, Box 1, Folder 16, TLA-UTA, p. 11.
44 Richard B. Henderson, “Fontaine Maury Maverick,” Handbook of Texas Online, Texas State Historical
Association, http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/MM/fma83.html (accessed July 13,
2010); Richard B. Henderson, Maury Maverick, a Political Biography (Austin: University of Texas Press,
1970).
The city machine responded to Maverick’s ascendancy by re-organizing itself under the banner of its own “reform” ticket in the May 1935 municipal elections. Incumbent Mayor Charles Kennon (C. K.) Quin, who had led the city since 1933, publicly advocated a cleaner city government while still quietly enjoying the machine’s solid support. Quin promised to end corruption, but after winning he instead consolidated the power of the machine in his own hands. “Since all pay checks made out to those working in the administration... had to be signed by him,” the TCLU pamphlet continues, “he found it a comparatively simple matter to bring recalcitrants into line. Instead of a ‘reform’ government, the citizenry of San Antonio soon found... a worse city administration [than] they had before.”

The stage was thus set for the uprising of 1938. Quin led the offensive against the strikers, steadfastly supporting the brutal police repression coordinated by Chief Owen Kilday. Maverick supported the union. In a telegram written to UCAPAWA organizer J. Austin Beasley but intended for public consumption, Maverick wrote:

I desire it most clearly understood that I stand for the protection of the right of peaceful picketing of any and all groups over the United States. That includes my friends the Latin American population of San Antonio which numbers nearly ninety thousand...In the city I want it known that I hope the people of San Antonio will fight for better living conditions... To the Latin American population must be given the Constitutional right of civil and religious liberty, the right to speak, and the right to organize and picket peacefully. More they are entitled to a decent standard of living [sic].

Maverick’s support for the strikers was not merely rhetorical or theoretical. Rather, it was at Maverick’s urging that Governor Allred asked the state industrial commission to hold a hearing on the strike. Maverick also opened the door for a union delegation led by organizer George Lambert and rank and file leader Santos Vásquez that traveled to Austin to meet with the governor and seek assistance from members of the state legislature. Such interventions quickly led to the settlement of the strike.47

As his telegram suggests, Maverick defended the pecan shellers’ struggle using the rhetoric of civil liberties and labor rights. He had been in correspondence with the national American Civil Liberties Union for nearly a decade, and he soon co-founded the affiliate TCLU, based in Austin. The organization’s first publication, cited at length above, was devoted entirely to the pecan sheller strike, highlighting the rampant police brutality, mass jailing, and violations of free speech rights that accompanied the conflict. Written by organizer George Lambert, the sixteen page fundraising pamphlet features an illustration of the iconic Alamo chapel above a sketch of the entrance to San Antonio City Hall, surrounded by the title: “San Antonio: The Cradle of Texas Liberty . . . And Its Coffin?”48

By the end of the strike in mid-March 1938, then, the battle lines were clearly drawn. While Maverick, the TCLU, and the pecan shellers union denounced the machine and celebrated the strikers’ victory Mayor Quin zeroed in on defeating Maverick in his

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47 Lambert interview, part II, 38, 43.
48 “The Cradle and the Coffin of Texas Liberty,” 1; Lambert interview, part II, 38. Lambert recalls that the TCLU used it to raise both awareness and money for progressive causes around the state. Future Congressman Bob Eckhardt drew the illustration, one of his first of many widely-circulated political cartoons that were a mainstay of Texas labor publications for the next two decades.
bid for a third term in Congress. Quin’s candidate in the all-important June Democratic
Primary was Paul Kilday, brother of Police Chief Owen Kilday.

Maverick had long depended upon what a writer in *Survey Graphic*, a
contemporary magazine, called “‘hell-and-high-water votes’—votes that went to him in
spite of anything because he was so well known and well liked.”49 But in reality
Maverick also looked to the city’s newly emboldened union movement for support, and
he readily received it, thanks to his support for the pecan shellers and other labor causes.
The local CIO unit’s political arm, Labor’s Non-Partisan League (LNPL) appointed
Lambert, Vásquez, and UCAPAWA organizer Willie Garcia to serve as the group’s
screening committee for candidates. The LNPL endorsed Maverick and prioritized his
campaign, promising to deliver the pecan sheller vote. They faced an uphill battle from
the start. Texas law required citizens to pay their poll taxes by the end of January each
election year, so the window expired the day the strike got underway. Consequently,
despite its close ties to the thousands of newly active union members, the LNPL was
prohibited from registering the workers to vote. Still, in just under one month’s time, the
LNPL campaign convinced an unprecedented number of West Side residents to cast their
ballots against the city machine. Maverick carried the sixteen LNPL precincts in the
*barrio* by some 1,000 votes.50 For his part, candidate Paul Kilday appealed to
conservative white voters by repeatedly branding Maverick and his supporters as

49 Audrey Granneberg, “Maury Maverick's San Antonio,” *Survey Graphic: Magazine of Social
50 Filewood, “Tejano Revolt,” 117-118.; Letter from George Lambert to Donald Henderson, July 1, 1938,
Lambert Papers AR127-6-2; Letter from George Lambert to Frank, July 28, 1938, Lambert Papers, AR127-
6-2.
communists. Quin padded the city payroll by hiring four hundred new city workers whom he paid over $3,000, probably as a *quid pro quo* for votes against Maverick. Police Chief Owen Kilday added icing to the cake by mobilizing his troops to fan out across the West Side to intimidate voters on a scale unseen since the conclusion of the strike. In the end, his brother carried the district, population approximately 250,000, by 493 votes out of 49,151 cast. The inertia of bossism, appeals that mixed racial resentment with anticommunist fervor, and the disfranchisement of most ethnic Mexicans proved too much for Maverick and his allies to overcome.

While Lambert and other union leaders had failed to completely transform the pecan sheller movement into a powerful political constituency, the union also struggled for survival. As noted above, in October 1938 Pecan King Seligmann abruptly closed the sheds and replaced nearly all of the workers with machines. The union looked on helplessly, and the larger movement, it seemed, was dead.

But the following spring, Maverick staged an improbable comeback. “Last summer [1938] he learned that only careful organization could defy a powerful machine, and he set out to build a strong political coalition of his own,” the *Survey Graphic* article continues. Maverick confronted the machine head-on, running against Quin for the post of Mayor in 1939. “His Fusion ticket organized all the elements which were friendly to

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53 Letter from George Lambert to Frank, July 28, 1938, Lambert Papers, AR127-6-2.
his progressive views: youth, women, middle class reform groups, Mexicans and labor.”

The “middle class reform groups,” led by “[white] women,” looked to Maverick to finally rid the city of the pervasive gaming and extensive alcohol trade that had earned Bexar (pronounced “bear”) County the epithets “beer county” and “the Free State of Bexar” during Prohibition. For their part, neither the “Mexicans” nor “labor” were universally supportive of Maverick. Of course, the two categories often blurred together: ethnic Mexican working people in and around the pecan sheller movement, still stinging from the shock of the industry’s re-mechanization, nonetheless remained organized enough to throw their collective weight behind Maverick’s campaign. In contrast, the all-white local affiliate of the AFL, rooted in the building trades and brewery workers, stuck steadfastly with its perceived “friends” in the machine and denounced Maverick as a partisan of the CIO. Surprisingly, Maverick’s close ties to the ethnic Mexican labor and Left did not prevent him from attracting the support of many well-off Mexican Americans, including LULAC leaders Joe Chacón and Alonzo Perales.

Contemporary sources tend to assume that the entire African American community of San Antonio remained hostile to Maverick’s Fusion coalition, and most historians have followed the same tack. But a closer reading of the interior politics of the Alamo City’s all-black East Side reveals that new fault lines and alliances were emerging there as well.

55 Granneberg, “Maury Maverick's San Antonio,” 5.
In the words of one black civil rights leader, Maverick “had a problem” when seeking support among African Americans.\(^5^7\) The Congressman turned mayoral candidate was a product not only of New Deal liberalism but of the progressivism that preceded it. His opposition to the city machine dovetailed with his commitment to combat vice—both progressive causes that now won him the unflattering support of the “middle class [white] reform groups” and “[white] women.” Yet these stances placed him in direct confrontation with Charles Bellinger, the black gaming, saloon, and political boss who regularly delivered as many as 8,000 pro-machine votes until his death in 1937. Maverick may have voted for the federal anti-lynching law and was clearly a friend of labor, but he was incapable of delivering the jobs and other patronage that Bellinger had secured from the machine for decades, or that his son Valmo Bellinger continued to offer after his passing. Maverick’s attack on bossism separated him from both father and son politically, while the candidate’s outspoken contempt for the Bellingers’ livelihood added extra fuel to the fire. Their disagreement led Maverick, often considered a racial liberal for his support for the anti-lynching bill and other civil rights causes, to support the establishment of the all-white Democratic Primary and to oppose nonpartisan municipal elections—the former measure would undermine the black bloc vote while the latter would restore it (both the white primary and nonpartisan local races became law). Throughout these fights, Maverick unleashed a steady stream of often quite personal criticism at Bellinger, at times using language that “carried racial overtones,” according to Kenneth Mason, author of the most extensive history of black

San Antonio from Reconstruction through the Depression. In contrast, Bellinger’s close ties to the machine did not prevent him from opposing the white primary, and his connections helped him contribute to the “upbuilding” of black schools and community centers—key institutions that mitigated the indignities of Jim Crow. The rift between the two men and the positions they in turn took all but ensured only minimal black support for Maverick during his 1934, ‘36, and ‘38 Congressional campaigns.58

Yet the East Side of the late 1930s was not the East Side of decades past, and upheaval within the African Americans community ultimately destabilized the Bellinger regime and pushed a significant segment of black voters into Maverick’s camp. A growing group of black reformers, organized in the local branch of the NAACP, steadily moved away from Bellinger until they broke away from the machine completely. Mason contends that the shift began in 1927, when the branch elected James Morris as the group’s first non-machine president. At the same time, the onset of the Depression after 1929 made it increasingly difficult for Bellinger to deliver the patronage dollars and jobs that had long buttressed his prominence within the East Side. Conflicts over school funding helped engender a chorus of African Americans who began questioning Bellinger’s efficacy. Mason writes that subsequently “critics were also absorbed into municipal operations,” including high school principal and community leader Samuel J. Sutton, who received token appointments to local boards aimed at encouraging black

employment in private business as well as black participation in the National Recovery Administration.⁵⁹

At the same time, the NAACP spawned a junior branch and a crop of new leaders under the tutelage of Morris. Barber John Inman, for example, joined the branch after leading a protest against unfair treatment of black service men at Camp Travis, an act that resulted in his banishment from all of the city’s military facilities, an enormous market for Inman and other small merchants in San Antonio. Mason writes, “He came to believe that ending racial discrimination would provide greater economic and political opportunities for African-Americans” and that they “could win greater support by creating alliances across the color line.” He starting working with various “progressive and liberal coalitions that sprang up in the city, and established working relations with white unions, and Mexican leaders such as Emma Tenayuca.” In 1932 he worked unsuccessfully to elect the first black city councilman, a campaign that earned the endorsement not only of black reformers but of ethnic Mexicans as well. Mason continues, “By 1937, Inman and others supported the predominately Mexican- and African-American Building Service Employees Union Local Number 84 in their successful campaign to win a twelve month employment guarantee and other benefits from the San Antonio Independent School District. His many activities brought him into contact with Maury Maverick.”⁶⁰

Another student of Morris in the junior NAACP branch followed a similar trajectory. Garlington Jerome (G. J.) Sutton, the son of principal Samuel Sutton, returned

⁶⁰ Ibid., 415-417.
to San Antonio from college in Ohio in 1938, and he quickly took over his brother’s fledgling mortuary home, founded two years earlier. Unlike machine leaders and even many black reformers, the younger Sutton “questioned the viability of racial separation as a provider and protector of civil rights” and instead advocated integration. While his father served on local boards and diplomatically challenged Bellinger, G. J. maintained complete autonomy and became a much fiercer critic of the machine. His occupation as an undertaker serving an all-black clientele also gave him a degree of economic independence that his father lacked as a school employee. Mason concludes that the “defection” of G. J. Sutton from the Bellinger apparatus “was a great loss” that “provided a sense of legitimacy to the anti-machine movement. . . [and] symbolized the growth of a conscious intellectual class.”

G. J. Sutton built upon and extended the advocacy of his father, first through the junior chapter of Morris’ NAACP and then as head of the local branch of the National Negro Congress (NNC), a militant coalition of African American civil rights, labor, and religious groups initially led by A. Philip Randolph, president of the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Like the barber Inman, Sutton sought the support of other ethnic groups in his nascent campaign for integration. Maury Maverick became the beneficiary of this search when Sutton secured the NNC chapter’s endorsement for the ex-Congressman’s 1939 mayoral campaign. Both men likely aided the unsuccessful

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61 The argument that economic independence allowed G. J. greater autonomy than Samuel is my own. The quotations are found in Ibid., 417-419. Mason identifies G. J. as the principal of Wheatley High School but makes no mention of the Sutton & Sutton Mortuary business. I have not verified the school claim, though G. J. clearly had ties to education, winning election to the junior college district board in 1948. Most sources from the post-WWII period identify Sutton as a mortician. For additional biographical information, see Leonard B. Murphy, “Sutton, Garlington Jerome,” Handbook of Texas Online, n.d., http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/SS/fsu11.html (accessed November 10, 2009).
effort to gain a special endorsement from the nonpartisan and customarily non-political NAACP. Still, individual members from the branch may have joined them to work in Maverick’s campaign.\footnote{Doyle, “Maury Maverick and Racial Politics in San Antonio, Texas, 1938-1941,” 206-207; Mason, “Paternal continuity,” 417-419. Doyle misidentifies his first name throughout her piece as George instead of Garlington. The NNC is known for its ties to the Communist Party’s Popular Front, connections that prompted Randolph to resign from its presidency in 1940 following the Nazi-Soviet Pact the previous year. See (accessed July 29, 2010) Daren Salter, “National Negro Congress (1935 - 1940's),” The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed, n.d., http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aah/national-negro-congress; Mark Naison, Communists in Harlem During the Depression, Blacks in the New World (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983).}

The community organizing work of Sutton, Inman, and other new NAACP leaders, combined with Charles Bellinger’s death in June 1937, created a new political constituency that Maverick hoped to add to his coalition in 1939. To be sure, the passing of the longtime boss did not destroy the black wing of the Quin machine, but it did improve the reformers’ ability to organize independently. Valmo Bellinger had carried on his father’s legacy by turning out votes for Kilday in the 1938 general election, and he now promised to deliver the bulk of the black votes to Mayor Quin. Maverick, meanwhile, counted on his liberal racial credentials to bring African Americans in to the fold. Despite his support for the white Democratic primary (which had barred black voters from participating in his removal from Congress the previous year), Maverick had been a steadfast proponent of civil rights in Washington. He publicly and personally leant his support to the black freedom struggle in Texas by speaking at the Hall of Negro Life and Culture Exhibition during the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas in 1936. His mayoral bid garnered attention from African American newspapers across the state,
and the Waco, Houston, and Dallas black weeklies all took the unusual step of endorsing him despite their geographic distance from the campaign.63

When Election Day rolled around on May 9, 1939, Maverick carried 35% of the East Side (black) vote, more than any anti-machine candidate ever. Maverick won 1,107 votes in the African American precincts, while Quin drew 1,665 (53%) and a third candidate, Leroy Jeffers, garnered the rest.64

Meanwhile, Maverick maintained his support among industrial labor unions through the LNPL-CIO (Labor’s Non-Partisan League), which included as many as 2,000 mostly ethnic Mexican members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union along with current and former members of UCAPAWA, the agricultural and packinghouse union that housed Pecan Shellers Local 172.65 The ILGWU’s international president, David Dubinsky, gave Maverick $1,000 for the fight, $250 of which the candidate redirected to the union’s local affiliates to carry out their part of his publicity effort.66 After the initial layoffs, George Lambert and other UCAPAWA organizers were eventually able to secure work on the new pecan shelling machines for some 2,000 union members, and their now higher wages filled the union coffers with dues that could be

64 Jeffers received 347 votes, or 11%. These numbers are based on Doyle’s calculations based on a precinct-by-precinct analysis. Doyle, “Maury Maverick and Racial Politics in San Antonio, Texas, 1938-1941,” 207-208. She notes that Maverick only admitted receiving approximately 20%, a figure that was repeated by a “reliable authority” in Granneberg, “Maury Maverick's San Antonio,” 39. But the larger number is probably more accurate.
65 Contracts for “most” of the women’s clothing industry covered “some 2,000 workers,” though some were probably not union members. Letter from George Lambert to Frank, August 23, 1938, Lambert Papers, AR127-6-2.
66 Charles Curtis Munz, “Gunning for Maverick,” Nation 149, no. 25 (December 16, 1939): 674; Sherwood Anderson, “Maury Maverick in San Antonio,“ New Republic 102, no. 13 (March 25, 1940): 399. Maverick was later indicted for having used the funds to pay the workers’ poll taxes, a customary practice for patrones but also a felony act in Texas. The charges were politically motivated and soon dropped.
used for political purposes. Other unemployed pecan shellers became full time political operatives. Lambert described LNPL’s combined effort as an “excellent” precinct-level “organizational job.” The mobilization duplicated in form and likely expanded upon the results of Maverick’s 1938 majority in the barrio. As historian Richard Garcia summarized it, “The Mexican laboring class was striking out against the bosses and working for the liberal Maverick.”

All three candidates sought the votes of the Mexican American middle class and campaigned on the West Side, but in the end most of this group backed Quin. While a handful of LULACers worked for Maverick, most of the group’s leaders campaigned for the incumbent. They differed, Garcia writes, as “politics and ideology superseded ethnicity.” The workers’ numbers ultimately triumphed. No exact breakdown is available for West Side, but observations of “heavy turnout” in favor of Maverick abound.

Finally, the revelation of Quin’s widespread vote buying and corruption on behalf of Paul Kilday in the 1938 Congressional primary took an additional toll, helping Maverick attract the votes of many self-styled progressives, “middle-class reform groups,” and “women.” Jeffers, however, was the primary beneficiary of the largely conservative white voters who bolted from Quin.

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67 Letter from George Lambert to Santos G. Vasquez, March 2, 1939, Lambert Papers, AR 127-6-2; Handwritten letter from Santos to George, [1939], giving names of unemployed ethnic Mexicans, probably pecan shellers, who can be put to work for political action, in Lambert Papers, AR127-6-2.
68 Letter from George Lambert to E. L. Oliver, May 10, 1939, Lambert Papers, AR127-6-2.
70 Ibid., 213.
71 See, for example, Ibid., 214.
Maverick won the high-turnout contest by plurality, gaining 18,375 votes (41%), a margin of 3,501 over C. K. Quin (33%); Jeffers polled 11,503 votes (26%). The narrow margin and the factional and demographic divisions outlined above had all but assured that he needed both a sizable victory on the ethnic Mexican West Side and a significant narrowing of his deficit on the African American East Side. He accomplished both goals and won the race.

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Black support for the Maverick campaign, long ignored by contemporary accounts and largely dismissed by historians, in fact represented a crucial new development that forever changed San Antonio and Texas politics. In adding independent African Americans to his loose coalition of “reform groups, women, Mexicans and labor,” Maverick laid the groundwork for decades of multiracial political and community organizing in the city and state—efforts in which working-class black and brown people played critical roles. The CIO (which represented labor’s left wing), white liberals, and unprecedentedly large, independent segments of the ethnic Mexican and African American communities all coalesced around Maverick’s campaign, just as they would continue to do for more than three decades. The successful 1939 effort was an extension of the pecan sheller movement that built upon the struggles of the previous year, a beneficiary of the rising militancy among some African American activists across

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73 Ibid., 207, note 46. Three other candidates split 121 votes. Garcia adds, “The election, consequently, was an anti-Quin vote by the Anglo community, but a pro-Maverick vote by many in the Mexican community.” Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941*, 214.

74 Doyle writes, “The support Maverick received from these nascent organizations [the NAACP and NNC] held qualitative, not quantitative, significance. Even with the help they provided...in the city’s black precincts Maverick received only 35 percent of the vote...” Doyle, “Maury Maverick and Racial Politics in San Antonio, Texas, 1938-1941,” 207 (my emphasis).
town, and the growing power of the industrial labor movement. It was a winning formula. Many of the activists who participated in the coalition did not soon forget it, and attempts to renew its promise abound in the annals of Texas history.

The emerging multiracial, liberal, and majority working-class coalition evidenced in the Maverick campaign represented a sea change in the state’s decades-old Jim Crow political environment—but not only on the left side of the aisle. Rather, the San Antonio pecan sheller uprising and its political outgrowth also helped re-shape the nature of the coalition’s conservative opposition. The latter found its most extreme expression in the infamous anticommmunist mob that stormed the City Auditorium after now-Mayor Maverick refused to bar the local Communist Party, led by Emma Tenayuca, from holding a meeting inside the evening of August 25, 1939. Maverick, a founder of the Texas Civil Liberties Union, maintained that the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the U. S. Constitution made it illegal for him to prohibit any group, regardless of ideology, from using a municipal facility. Veterans’ organizations, the Catholic Bishop, conservative and machine politicians and columnists—all opponents of the pecan sheller movement and Maverick’s coalition in both 1938 and 1939—held a different view. A group of 8,000 led American Legion officers, a well-known “Ku Kluxer,” and a former Republican gubernatorial candidate stormed past nearly two hundred policemen wielding tear gas and fire hoses (this time to protect the Communists!). According to a report in The Nation, they “smashed into the auditorium,” from which the Party members had already escaped through a side door, and “held a mass meeting.” One speaker who addressed the mob from the dais clarified the group’s legal philosophy: “When they
joined the Communist Party they wrote themselves out of the Constitution, and they aren’t entitled to free speech or anything else.’” Later that evening, members of the mob raised an effigy of the mayor in front of City Hall, “with a placard attached which read, ‘Hanged that Americanism might live.’” Fifteen hooded Klansmen rounded out the night by visiting Maverick’s ranch “but withdrew when they found he was not there.”

The mob’s exploits were just the most visible expression of the counter-insurgency taking place in San Antonio. Led by C. K. Quin, the machine and its reactionary allies denounced Maverick *ad nauseum*, repeatedly branding him a Communist and a “CIO-lover.” Meanwhile, Maverick once in office failed to fully cultivate his supporters among African Americans on the East Side, and the continued decline of the pecan industry further eroded the predominately ethnic Mexican industrial labor movement on the West Side. The Mayor survived long enough to help Roosevelt secure his nomination for a third term in the face of a potent primary challenge from Vice-President John Nance Garner, a conservative Texas Democrat. This triumph on the national scale did not, however, change the fact that Maverick no longer had a local base. In the 1941 municipal election, two years after the multiracial coalition made him mayor, Maverick had no hope as he lost his own reelection bid to his old nemesis C. K. Quin. The machine returned to power.

Thus a mass movement in San Antonio emerged and faded, leaving behind not only many wrecked lives and several stunted political careers but also vivid memories of

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the democratic possibilities that just might be obtainable through labor organizing in coalition with diverse campaigns for civil rights. Organizers like George Lambert and G. J. Sutton would not soon forget their maverick uprising, and neither would the countless mexicanos/as, white liberals, and black civil rights activists who participated in it.

“Segregation... is an Economic Problem”

In the short term, at least, the conservative counter-insurgency had triumphed in San Antonio. Texas politics appeared to be returning to its undemocratic origins and norms. Organized labor’s beachhead at Ford Motors in Dallas did not produce a Maury Maverick, and most African American and ethnic Mexican workers in the Lone Star State remained untouched by the stillborn struggle for democracy. Still, a quiet revolution was taking place in Houston and all along the Texas Gulf Coast, where working people of all hues flocked into a rapidly-expanding and often quite dynamic new labor movement.

Yet even within this large migration into the house of labor all was not well. White working people typically shied away from using the new unions as a force to combat Jim Crow, and white employers gladly exploited the racial divisions among their workforce. By the middle of World War II, many of the African Americans launched a series of efforts to counter discrimination on the shop floor and in their unions, and they carried those experiences into a growing local civil rights movement in Houston. They demanded an end to racial discrimination and a new beginning that included expanded economic opportunities. And in the process, by the end of the 1940s, they had formed
several new organizational bases and fundamentally rewritten the rules of state and local politics.

The gusher at Spindletop in 1901 led to a rush for black gold in which countless wildcatters gradually gave way to a handful of vertically integrated Texas-based corporations. Houston quickly became the center of the world’s oil industry, a position that in turn engendered a wide range of ancillary enterprises. The opening of the Houston Ship Channel in 1915 connected the city to the Gulf, adding a critical piece of infrastructure to the already snowballing trend of rapid industrialization. Houston had long been a hub in the exporting of raw materials, but the addition of oil and a viable port now made it the region’s undisputed production and transportation headquarters. The city grew from a population of 44,000 in 1900 to over 292,000 in 1930.77 Black and white working people from rural East Texas and Louisiana flocked to find jobs in Houston’s new industries, as did smaller numbers of ethnic Mexicans from both sides of the South Texas border. Still, like their counterparts in Dallas and San Antonio, the new arrivals in Houston did not initially receive a sizable share of the dividends created by big oil and related industries.78

That arrangement first began to change in the stevedoring industry. Nearly dormant in 1931, the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) became the bedrock of the reinvigorated labor movement in Houston—but it did so within the confines of Jim Crow. Since 1914, the two segregated Houston locals of the ILA had

split the available work fairly evenly using a “50-50 agreement” under which black and white crews alternated unloading the fore and aft halves of each boat in port. The division was neither perfect nor uncontested, but across the board relations between the segregated locals proved harmonious if not cordial.\footnote{George N. Green, “Introduction,” in Gilbert Mers, Working the Waterfront: the Ups and Downs of a Rebel Longshoreman (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), ix-xviii.; Gilbert Mers, “Anecdotal History of Local 1273, I. L. A.,” n.d. [ca. 1970?], photocopy courtesy ILA Local 1351 in possession of author, 2-3 (also available in Gilbert Mers Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library [hereinafter HMRC], Mss 63, Box 1, Folder 9. This was not always true, nor was it true everywhere. Dissent within Local 872 had led to creation of “buffalo” Local 1409 in 1915. The problem was that work was distributed evenly between racial groups even though there were more black workers in many ports (thus each black man got less work). Mers blasted this breaking of the “50-50 agreement” as well as black strikebreaking, but historian Ernest Obadele-Starks argues that this was an assertion of black aspiration in a racially segmented labor market. See Mers, “Anecdotal History of Local 1273,” 5-7; Obadele-Starks, Black Unionism in the Industrial South, 46-47. In many cases in Texas, the ILA also chartered a third local composed of ethnic Mexican workers that received a small share of the work and/or the least desirable tasks. See Rebecca Anne Montes, “Working for American Rights: Black, White, and Mexican-American Dockworkers in Texas During the Great Depression” (Ph.D. diss., Austin: University of Texas, 2005).}

Yet despite its imperfections, the ILA’s 50-50 system afforded black workers their first permanent place within the house of organized labor in Texas, a position that stood in sharp contrast to the trend of near absolute exclusion that had long prevailed in most AFL craft unions. From that foothold, historian Ernest Obadele-Starks argues, African American workers in and around Houston gradually gained entry into unions in the railroad, shipbuilding, oil, and steel industries. Black workers remained confined to the lowest-paying, dirtiest, and least-desirable jobs, and Jim Crow customs within the unions ranged from segregated locals or limited auxiliary membership to unequal seniority systems or complete exclusion from the collective bargaining and grievance processes.\footnote{Obadele-Starks, Black Unionism in the Industrial South. In the second decade of the Twentieth Century, black workers in East Texas joined the radical, interracial, but short-lived Brotherhood of Timber Workers, an affiliate of the Industrial Workers of the World. See Green, Grass-roots socialism, 204-222.} In other words, the boom of organizing in the 1930s did not include a
challenge to either the entrenched white supremacist division of labor, or its reproduction in racist union structures.

Still, African Americans generally jumped at the opportunity to join available unions. Despite the inequities, as Robert Korstad and others have shown, collective bargaining agreements at times entitled black workers to some degree of fair treatment and racial egalitarianism on the job—even as they were denied equality with whites in other areas of life. For example, the democratic processes of some interracial unions allowed African Americans, who were often unable to participate in formal electoral politics outside the union, to vote in internal elections and to partake in creating organizational policy. In addition, unions in the South, as elsewhere in the nation, challenged the autocratic independence of white foremen who for decades had arbitrarily hired, fired, directed, and disciplined workers of all races without reference to any standards of fairness or guidance from a central human resources administration. Union contracts instead required foremen to follow specific procedures for promotions and transfers and only permitted disciplinary action in cases of “just cause.” Contracts further established grievance procedures that allowed black workers to demand a hearing with upper management. In the Jim Crow South, such provisions represented a deep symbolic challenge to white supremacy since they undermined the racial hierarchy that sanctioned white reprisals against black mobility both inside and outside the workplace. Most important, unions offered black workers unusual job security. Labor’s record on the racial front was checkered, to say the least, but participation in unions still afforded some African American workers an unprecedented degree of “shop floor democracy”
throughout the segregated South. Historian Robert Korstad adds that union contracts replaced the “racial etiquette, paternalism, [and] personalism” customary under Jim Crow with “a new language of rights and obligations” understood by workers and managers alike.\textsuperscript{81} Obadele-Starks makes a similar argument regarding black workers in Texas, who he contends joined the labor movement \textit{en masse} as part of a broader effort to improve their economic condition and gain access to first class citizenship. Likewise, historian Michael Botson’s detailed case study of African American unionists over three decades at Houston’s Hughes Tool Company adds that black workers in Houston looked to the union not only for protection from their employer but also in order to gain access to highly-skilled, lucrative positions that had long been reserved exclusively for white workers.\textsuperscript{82}

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Across the board, black Texans voted with their feet—for the union, and often as a bloc. Paradoxically, the growth of a race- and class-conscious black labor movement in Houston remains both a well-known fact and a poorly understood phenomenon among scholars and laypersons alike. Historians of Texas labor have not looked far beyond the race-based worksite activism of union members, while scholars of the “long civil rights movement” and more generally of black history in Houston have not looked closely at the role of working people. Many African Americans who currently inhabit the city’s inner neighborhoods have parents or relatives who were union members, and some can still

\textsuperscript{81} Korstad, \textit{Civil Rights Unionism}, chap. 8 (first quotation on p. 217; second quotation on p. 211; third and fourth quotations on p. 214).

identify the key black labor leaders of the mid-Twentieth Century. A handful even continued the struggle by joining present-day unions.

Yet the larger significance of their elders’ workplace activism has been largely forgotten, as have the connections that made the black labor movement a critical hub of social justice organizing in the larger African American community. The lives of the working-class black civil rights activists who made up both the black unions and the black freedom struggle, however, shed new light on the networks and philosophies that underlay both movements. Community and labor organizers put forth an expansive vision centered on undermining Jim Crow at its core, which included not only direct action demonstrations and litigation but engagement with electoral politics and ongoing fights against economic oppression. In the 1930s and 1940s, their work in all of these arenas engendered a broad movement for “civil rights unionism” composed of black trade unionists and revolving around the Houston branch of the NAACP. That struggle, in turn, set the stage for the more recognizable, “short” civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, a campaign with a deeper meaning and broader agenda than is commonly recognized.

The activism of one dynamic husband and wife duo clearly delineates the links between black labor, civil rights, and political activism. Moses LeRoy was born in Abbeville, in southern Louisiana, on December 9, 1897. He had the good fortune of receiving a formal education at a small boarding school run by Baptists in nearby New Iberia. Still, he had “one heck of a time trying to eke out a living,” and he left school as a teenager to work alongside other black men in the sawmills located in the northern
portion of the state. An economic downturn in 1914 pushed LeRoy west to Houston, where he found casual jobs digging sewer ditches and performing unskilled tasks for contractors in the city’s affluent southwestern section. He finally found a relatively good job as a “handy-man chauffeur” for a doctor and his family, an income that allowed him to settle in the Fifth Ward, a poor, mostly-black neighborhood just north of the Buffalo Bayou and downtown. In 1917, LeRoy was driving home from dropping the doctor off at the train station when black soldiers at nearby Camp Logan rose up in mutiny and a race riot engulfed the city. “I don’t know why I wasn’t killed in that riot,” LeRoy recalled over sixty years later. LeRoy hid his boss’s car and set out on foot. “I didn’t see any Blacks. I wondered what was happening so I went down to Milam and Prairie [streets]. I saw a mob down there. They broke into Carter’s hardware store and took all the ammunition and every one of the whites marched by me and all of them was going to kill a Nigger.” LeRoy managed to escape this fate and hid in his home as the authorities imposed martial law on the city. With “a [white] soldier on every street car” and “a soldier on every corner” downtown, he finally returned to work, driving his doctor around the nearly abandoned city.83

83 Moses LeRoy interview by Chandler Davidson, January 25, 1979, Houston, Texas. Chandler Davidson Texas Politics Research Collection, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University, MS 259, Box 9, Folder 6, 1-6 (first quotation on 2; second quotation on 4; third and fourth quotations on 5; fifth and sixth quotations on 6). On the riot, see Robert V. Haynes, A Night of Violence: the Houston Riot of 1917 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976). For its larger national context, see Adriane Danette. Lentz-Smith, Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009). For its antecedents in the multiracial world of the Texas borderlands, see James N. Leiker, Racial Borders: Black Soldiers Along the Rio Grande, 1st ed., South Texas regional studies (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002). Davidson also recalled that LeRoy testified publicly about his experience during the riot at a hearing on the implementation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Haynes, the scholarly expert on the conflict, was supposed to speak, but he failed to attend the hearing. As the legal team searched for a replacement, LeRoy offered and then rendered his services as a participant-observer. Chandler Davidson, informal conversation with author, Houston, May 17, 2010.
While Houston leaders today speak with pride of the city’s relatively “moderate” history of race relations, LeRoy clearly had a different experience. The Camp Logan Riot doubtlessly remained on his mind as he transitioned from an ordinary worker to a renowned social justice organizer. He narrowly avoided the draft into the Great War, leaving his job as a chauffeur to find war-related work at a saw mill on the edge of the bayou in town. The year after the Armistice, in 1920, LeRoy found work at the Southern Pacific Railroad yards, where he would remain for more than forty-seven years. The railroad ended up giving him stability, but it did not offer any room for advancement. Black workers were confined to hazardous, dirty jobs, and classified in “Group Three,” that is, as unskilled labor. “Irrespective of how much expertise a Black had,” LeRoy recalled, “he was assigned to the labor designate.” Groups One and Two were populated exclusively by white workers, who protected their status through seniority systems established by their all-white craft unions, the railroad Brotherhoods. The whites held skilled positions such as “checkers” of incoming cargo or tradesmen who fixed broken railroad cars, while blacks served as freight handlers, stevedores, porters, and other common labor tasks. A few were “breakout men, like if the truck broke down and you had to push it on, [you were] considered a breakout man.”

The racial division of labor at the railroad yards was taken as a given, and black workers like LeRoy responded accordingly. In 1922, skilled white workers struck the Southern Pacific, and black workers eagerly, if temporarily, replaced them. The company transported them directly to and from the Fifth Ward, while the white workers

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84 LeRoy interview by Davidson, 7-8 (first quotation on 8); Moses LeRoy, interview by George N. Green, August 19, 1971 Houston, Texas, TLA-UTA, OH 20, 3-5 (second quotation on 5).
aggressively pursued the black scabs before and after work. “And then the hell would break out,” LeRoy recalled. “The whites would run them to fair thee well.” The whites eventually returned to work, and the blacks were forced back into their old jobs. More than a decade later, sometime in the 1930s, LeRoy joined an all-black auxiliary to the all-white Brotherhood of Steamship and Railway Clerks. He was “harshly criticized for going into that type of union” since the auxiliary had no bargaining or voting rights, leaving black workers to be represented solely by their white Brotherhood counterparts. Yet LeRoy’s decision was economically motivated and at least in part coerced: joining the auxiliary was the only way that black workers could enter the “Reserve Department,” which was probably a new guarantee against future layoffs created by the white Brotherhood.\(^{85}\)

Around 1940, LeRoy began to believe that breaking down the racial barriers in the workplace was both paramount and possible. He credited Rayford Logan, the preeminent African American historian, with spurring him to action. Dr. Logan appeared as the commencement speaker at Jack Yates High School, the city’s second-oldest all-black institution of its kind. LeRoy attended the graduation ceremony along with his wife, a native of Fort Bend County, Texas, born Erma DeLoney on January 21, 1911.

\(^{85}\) LeRoy interview with Davidson, 10; LeRoy interview with Green, 1-5 (both quotations on 1). Green suggests that the white clerks Brotherhood officially authorized the organizing of black freight handlers in 1939, but LeRoy remembers joining earlier in the decade. It’s entirely possible that LeRoy did in fact join before the union’s executive council officially authorized the addition of black members. Previously, smaller numbers of black workers had joined all-black federal locals chartered under the national AFL. It is likely that members of these autonomous unions were the ones who criticized LeRoy for joining the auxiliary. My interpretation of the coercion stems from a close reading of the interview but has not been verified using union sources. The clerks would have needed some mechanism to entice black workers to join, so LeRoy’s suggestion that he was motivated by gaining access to the Reserve Department would make sense in that context.
Very little information about her early years has survived; her only individual oral history resulted in only a single page of paraphrased notes by interviewer Ruthe Winegarten.

But Mrs. LeRoy frequently interjected her opinions into interviews dominated by her husband, and the two were invariably described as “a team.” In any event, both LeRoys heard Dr. Logan speak at Jack Yates. Moses remembered the historian’s speech vividly even decades later: “And I can probably quote him verbatim,” Mr. LeRoy said.

He said, “We must have peace in the world... We must have a just peace, a lasting peace. Not a peace as we had in World War I signed behind closed doors by the world’s three great dictators. Orlando of Italy, Lloyd George of England, and Clemenceau of France.” He said, “It must be a people’s peace. What are you willing to contribute?” As I sat there and listened to that master sermon I made myself a promise... If from tonight I can make a contribution irrespective of how minute, I would try. I think Rayford Logan gave me the biggest push in my life.

Mrs. LeRoy was also inspired by the professor’s call.\(^86\)

Newly politicized, the LeRoys drew upon their experiences of racism and economic exclusion and plunged headlong into the city’s growing civil rights and black labor movements. The two issues became inseparable for Mr. LeRoy: “[S]egregation and discrimination is [sic] an economic problem,” he later reflected.

They didn’t discriminate against me because of my color but in the final analysis it paid a hellacious dividend... The industrialist would give the poor white worker maybe a dollar... and give the poor Black fifty-five cents. And they would pay the poor white worker so bad he’d go back to the industrialist and say, “Boss, can’t you do a little better?” He’d say, “My old lady and I can hardly make it.” But he was told, “I’m giving you a dollar now because you’re better than those niggers.” He kept this “nigger” dangling over their heads. He’d say, “Let me tell you one thing, I

can get these niggers for 55 cents and they could do as good a job as you can.” You might not believe it, but if the poor white worker (and he is now [in 1979] wiping the prejudice out of his eyes) if he could get with that darky, both of them could get a dollar and a half. It’s that simple.\textsuperscript{87}

Armed with this vision, drawing upon a life of exclusion, and motivated by the oratory of Dr. Logan, LeRoy began to challenge the racial division of labor on the job. “I was more or less interested in breaking down the barrier that barred blacks from integration and high-paying jobs, because of the group system...” he recalled.\textsuperscript{88}

By the early 1940s, as Moses became increasingly active in his union auxiliary, the couple also increased their commitment to the local branch of the NAACP. Established in Houston in 1913, the chapter had fluctuated between small and dormant until 1937, when it began a renaissance, thanks largely to the efforts of Lulu B. White. That year, according to her biographer Merline Pitre, White left a teaching job to become the branch’s youth director, an unpaid position that she could afford thanks to her husband Julius’s successful career as a “businessman, nightclub owner, promoter of public entertainment, and policy runner.” Five years earlier Mr. White had served as the charter president of the Harris County Negro Democratic Club. The Club sponsored and White financed the \textit{Grovey v. Townsend} (1935) case, an ill-fated challenge to the white primary in which the U. S. Supreme Court established a new precedent that delayed the winning of the franchise for almost a decade. Still, the Club produced a key nucleus of leaders that took over the local NAACP branch in 1937. For her part, although women were excluded from formal decision-making positions in the association, Mrs. White’s

\textsuperscript{87} LeRoy interview by Davidson, 9.
\textsuperscript{88} LeRoy interview by Green, 3.
position as youth director gave her access to the group’s “inner circle” of leaders. She attended the founding conference of the Texas State Conference of Branches in 1937 and spearheaded a new membership drive in Houston. In 1939, after branch president Clifford Richardson, Sr., died in office, Mrs. White briefly served as the chapter’s acting president before returning to her role as head of the Youth Council. In that capacity she worked with the new president, Rev. Albert A. Lucas, as the branch soon blossomed from just over 100 to nearly 2,000 members. In 1943, four years after she refused to remain a branch officer, White accepted the post of Executive Secretary, the chapter’s top staff position. Under her leadership, the Houston NAACP extended its reputation as a particularly militant branch while growing to 12,000 members, the second largest number in the country after only Detroit.  

The LeRoys rallied behind Lulu White and helped her shape the branch’s future by forging connections between the NAACP and ongoing labor and political organizing. Erma became an aide to White, later describing the latter as a close friend and political mentor. Moses was elected to the branch’s Executive Board and worked on youth outreach before chairing the group’s Labor and Industry Committee. During World War II, the Houston branch took up the cause of black workers who, like LeRoy, were increasingly demanding an end to discrimination on the job. His involvement in the black auxiliary at the Southern Pacific brought him into contact with other African

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89 Merline Pitre, *In Struggle Against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 13 (first quotation), 25-36 (second quotation on 29). Richardson drew sharp criticism for leafleting on behalf of Garner’s presidential campaign at the national NAACP convention but died unexpectedly just two weeks later, before he could be removed from his post.  
90 “Phone Call from Erma LeRoy to Ruthe Winegarten,” Winegarten Papers, 2.325, Box W70; Letter from Anne Pittman to Moses Leroy, November 26, 1946, Moses LeRoy Collection, HMRC, Mss 90, Box 1, Folder 1.
American railroad unionists, including A. Philip Randolph of the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. In 1941, Randolph threatened to organize 100,000 black workers to march on the U.S. Capitol to protest the segregation of the armed forces and defense industries. A week before the scheduled demonstration, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which banned racial discrimination in war-related federal contracts and established a temporary Committee on Fair Employment Practices (FEPC) as a new enforcement agency for the duration of the World War. Randolph called off the planned mass protest in response, but he also re-created the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) as a permanent organization aimed at expanding upon its initial victory. Shortly after the war, LeRoy joined Randolph and MOVM delegates from thirty-seven states at a rally in Washington in which demonstrators demanded the creation of a permanent FEPC to finally end peacetime employment discrimination. For her part, Lulu White won the branch’s support for a successful campaign for pay equity that would bring the salaries of African American educators in line with those of their white counterparts. She was also a steadfast organizer in the campaign for a permanent FEPC and a vocal critic of efforts to segregate the wartime Office of Price Administration.91

The LeRoys and White were joined in the Houston NAACP branch by countless other labor activists. Among them was Richard Randolph Grovey, the plaintiff in the

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unsuccessful 1935 case against the white primary, who worked primarily as a barber but
doubled as an organizer for local CIO unions. Another was Sidney Hasgett, a letter
carrier at the Post Office, who in 1940 continued the fight for the franchise when he
attempted to vote in a primary election along with Julius White and Carter Wesley,
publisher of the state’s leading black newspaper, the *Informer*. Hasgett became the
plaintiff for the branch’s new test case until NAACP National Counsel Thurgood
Marshall dropped his appeal in favor of a new, stronger suit filed on behalf of fellow
Houstonian and NAACP activist, Dr. Lonnie Smith, a dentist. The U. S. Supreme Court
finally settled the issue in the resulting case, *Smith v. Allright* (1944), which forced the
Texas Democratic Party to open its primary to all voters, including African Americans.
“We used Lonnie Smith as a guinea pig,” Moses LeRoy later recalled, drawing attention
to the campaign’s origins in the larger, militant milieu of the Houston branch. Similarly,
Heman Marion Sweatt, a postal worker and union activist like Hasgett, took an active
role in the chapter’s Youth Council and labor activities before deciding to apply to the
University of Texas Law School, an action that gave rise to another landmark civil rights
decision in 1950. Barber and CIO organizer George Nelson rounded out the who’s who
of laborite activists that also played important roles in the local NAACP.92

Historian Pitre argues that “Lulu White’s vision of economic reform in the 1940s
was positive, practical, and to some, even revolutionary.” The full integration of African
Americans into industry would not only bolster their economic condition but would also

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92 Moses LeRoy interview by Marguerite Johnston Barnes, Houston, n.d. [ca. 1986], Marguerite Johnston
Barnes Research Materials for *Houston, The Unknown City*, 1830-1991, Woodson Research Center,
Fondren Library, Rice University, MS 455, Box 2, Folder 28, 8-11 (quotation on 10); Pitre, *In Struggle
Against Jim Crow*, 66.
“improve the climate of race relations” in America.\textsuperscript{93} The organizing campaigns of the Houston branch thus reflected both White’s vision and the attitudes and activism of LeRoy and the other labor activists outlined above. White controversially embraced the CIO—by then renamed the Congress of Industrial Organizations—despite the rising criticism concerning the role of Communists in the industrial union federation. “As she put it,” Pitre writes, “‘You take your friends where you find them.’”\textsuperscript{94} The branch collaborated with the CIO’s Political Action Committee (CIO-PAC), which had helped defeat three conservative Texas Congressmen in 1943, sponsored citizenship classes for black voters before \textit{Smith v. Allright}, and encouraged poll tax payments and get out the vote efforts for black Houstonians after 1944.\textsuperscript{95}

White, Grovey, LeRoy, and other NAACP labor activists also provided critical support for 5,000 black workers who walked off the job as part of the nationwide steel strike in 1946. When over 700 black Houston municipal workers struck that same year, the City Manager attempted to replace them. When he issued the order, Pitre writes, he did not take into consideration the roles played by Lulu White and the NAACP in the labor movement. He was probably unaware that White served as a network activator for the labor movement, that she had daily contact with Moses Leroy of the AFL and Richard Randolph Grovey of the CIO, and that she helped to politicize black workers and instruct them concerning their rights, while Moses Leroy and Richard Grovey helped to galvanize the workers and potential scabs around the strike.\textsuperscript{96}

More than five thousand AFL members converged on City Hall in support of the strikers, and black workers refused to cross the picket line despite promises of permanent,\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 56 (both quotations).\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 63.\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 65.\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 65-69 (quotation on 68-69).
lucrative jobs. The strikers eventually returned to work with a wage increase. Soon thereafter, branch labor activists helped organize the Houston Area Labor Conference, a radical gathering that passed a resolution calling “For World Peace—For the Freedom of Oppressed Peoples.” Pitre concludes,

The labor movement among blacks in Houston included public spokespersons and network activators, not simply articulate leaders and a mass of followers. To be sure, White’s effectiveness was closely related to the work of such labor movement advance men as Richard Grovey, Sidney Hasgett, Heman Marion Sweatt, and Moses Leroy. These men worked publicly organizing black workers and privately negotiating with white employers for better wages and working conditions. They risked their reputations and their livelihoods by accepting leadership roles in the fledgling labor movement, by informing Lulu White of the discrimination heaped upon black workers, and by developing strategies for securing economic parity. Lulu White’s sharp tongue and bold speeches made her widely popular with the labor movement. Yet in essence she was a network activator and gadfly for the movement.97

Labor and civil rights victories in Houston came in quick succession during and immediately following World War II. The FEPC had opened up new industrial jobs to African Americans, CIO-PAC had deposed several of the worst Dixiecrats, Smith had enfranchised black voters, and workers like LeRoy had risen the ranks within their unions. All this helped propel White and the NAACP, which in turn provided critical support to powerful strikes by local steel and municipal workers.

97 Ibid., 69-70 (quotation on 70).
Such success at the local level, however, could not withstand the impact of the conservative turn in national and state politics. In 1946, black Houstonians joined the national campaign to pressure Congress to create a permanent FEPC, but conservative Southern Democrats killed the legislation. U. S. Senator William “Pappy” O’Daniel of Texas likely reflected the attitude of many of his sectional compatriots when he explained to Lulu White in a 1945 letter that the FEPC “was damaging to race relations” because it “stirs up strife.”

O’Daniel had already proven himself an enemy of the labor movement. As Governor of Texas in 1941, he had pushed for and signed the O’Daniel Anti-Violence Act, a law that made picket-line conflicts or threats punishable as a felony offence. His bill anticipated and set the stage for even more retrenchment of labor rights. In 1947, the Texas legislature—responding to the postwar upheavals in the steel, auto, and other basic industries—expanded upon the O’Daniel Act by passing nine additional anti-labor laws. One prohibited mass picketing, a practice it defined as two pickets standing within fifty feet of one another!

Meanwhile, in Washington, Congress overrode President Truman’s veto of the Taft-Hartley Act, a bill that gutted labor’s “magna carta,” the Wagner Act. Taft-Hartley outlawed the sit-down strike, sympathy strikes, large-scale picketing, and the secondary boycott and allowed states to pass right-to-work laws. It also required union officers to sign affidavits pledging their non-membership in the Communist Party, a provision that soon led to the mass purging of

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98 Ibid., 62. See also Obadele-Starks, *Black Unionism in the Industrial South*, 123-127.
radicals from within the labor movement. While the Wagner Act had protected workers from employer reprisals such as the beatings and intimidation that took place at Ford in Dallas, Taft-Hartley tipped the industrial relations balance decisively in favor of the bosses.\textsuperscript{100} A year later, in 1948, Truman added insult to injury when he sent a watered-down civil rights bill to Congress that did not include a revived FEPC. The President’s weak legislation still died in the Senate, where it fell victim to a filibuster by Southern members like O’Daniel.\textsuperscript{101}

Houston’s civil rights unionists, like their counterparts across the country, reacted to the onslaught of anti-labor legislation and the inaction toward Jim Crow by turning to electoral politics. Truman’s failure to defeat Taft-Hartley and slow progress on civil rights led many African American activists and leftist whites to abandon the President during his reelection bid in 1948. That year, Moses LeRoy “took a leave of absence from the Democratic Party and helped to blow life into the Progressive Party movement in this country...[W]e brought Henry Wallace along, the great vice-president of Roosevelt” from 1941 to 1945 who had been dropped from the ticket in 1944 in favor of Truman. Wallace was then appointed Secretary of Commerce, but Truman fired him because Wallace advocated rapprochement with the Soviet Union. By 1948 Wallace became the standard-bearer for the left wings of the labor and civil rights movements, emerging as the presidential nominee of their new third party. For LeRoy and other civil rights and labor activists in Houston, Wallace brought a fresh perspective that forever changed the political landscape. “[H]e came along and cast his hat in the ring and said... ‘Down with

\textsuperscript{101} Wada, “President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice (FEPC).”
segregation! Down with racism!’ Well that broke the gentlemen’s agreement between
the other parties [that they would remain lily-white], so they began to holler ‘Me too!’
So if there’s any liberality among either one of the parties, it’s because of the frontal
attack we made on them.”

The Progressive Party of Texas drew heavily upon the networks previously
established by the NAACP and the CIO. Lulu White served as a Vice-Chairman of the
interracial Committee to Get Wallace on the Ballot in Texas, which met in Houston in
late March, 1948. Houston labor lawyer Herman Wright served as its Chairman, and
Austin writer J. Frank Dobie was the Honorary Chairman. Wright’s partner Arthur
Mandell and Harry Koger, an organizer for UCAPAWA in San Antonio, also served on
the executive committee. A month later the party held its founding convention, again
in Houston. San Antonio NAACP leader John Inman was elected party chairman for the
26th state senate district. LeRoy credited the Progressive Party with holding the first
integrated political meetings in the South. While his observation is surely overstated, it
still indicates the novelty of such interactions for LeRoy and the unprecedented nature of
black participation in electoral politics in Texas. LeRoy also remembers meeting
Wallace during one of the candidate’s several visits to the Lone Star State. On May
25, 1948, LeRoy received a form letter listing the names of potential party contacts in his

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102 LeRoy interview with Davidson, 13. On the national Progressive Party campaign and Wallace, see
Curtis Daniel MacDougall, Gideon’s Army (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1965); Graham J. White and
John R. Maze, Henry A. Wallace: His Search for a New World Order (Chapel Hill: University of North
103 Minutes of the Committee to Get Wallace on the Ballot in Texas, 1948, Cook (Byron and Rannie)
Papers, CAH 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 1. On White, see also Pitre, In Struggle Against Jim Crow, 75-78.
104 Minutes of the Founding Convention Held April 25, 1948, in the Music Hall, Houston Tex., Cook
Papers, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 1.
105 LeRoy interview with Green, 32.
precinct, number 47. It appears that he heeded the party’s call to organize black voters at least in his immediate neighborhood. On November 12, days after the election, LeRoy wrote his own form letter thanking supporters for their “most sincere, [important], and untiring stand in the interest of and on behalf of social justice, equality of opportunity, and freedom for all men everywhere...” Wallace polled just 2.4% of the national vote and failed to carry a single state, but he may have won a number of black precincts in Houston. In the final months of the campaign, Truman’s camp won the endorsement of the national CIO, whose leaders worked tirelessly to bring rank and file union members back into the President’s fold. LeRoy and other black Houstonians stuck with Wallace. Even after the defeat, LeRoy remained optimistic: “In my opinion the New Party is by no means dissolved. We shall ever continue to fight for the ideas for which we deem right and just.”

Erma LeRoy also took on leadership positions in the NAACP and Progressive Party movement. At some point she became an officer of the Houston NAACP branch (only fragmentary evidence is available), and by 1947 she served as assistant recording secretary for the Texas Conference of Branches. By that date, White was now director of branches for the state conference, and Mrs. LeRoy at times accompanied White as she

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106 Letter from Progressive Party to Dear Friend, May 25, 1948, LeRoy Collection, Mss 90, Box 1, Folder 1.
traveled across Texas. In January 1948, LeRoy ran in a special general election for the state House of Representatives, perhaps as an independent but certainly with the support of the city’s civil rights unionists who soon formed the nucleus of the local Progressive Party. Her candidacy represented one of the first African American bids for the state legislature in the Twentieth Century, coming less than four years after the fall of the white primary and more than a decade before Barbara Jordan first stood for office. LeRoy likely carried several precincts.

The LeRoys’ trajectory from ordinary working people turned trade unionists and finally neighborhood political activists was not unique. Byron and Rannie Cook followed a remarkably similar path into the civil rights unionist movement of the 1940s and beyond. The Cooks left behind few records of their exploits, but it is clear that they entered the struggle by way of the National Alliance of Postal Employees (NAPE), the all-black industrial union that combined radical racial uplift with militant shop floor representation, even though it lacked formal collective bargaining rights. NAPE was founded in Houston in 1913 after discussions that took place in the home of James Leonard Sweatt, father of future civil rights plaintiff Heman Marion Sweatt. Like the

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111 Moses LeRoy interview with Chandler Davidson, 17-18; “Phone Call from Erma LeRoy,” Winegarten Papers; Letter from Chandler Davidson to Ruthe Winegarten, October 1, 1991, Winegarten Papers, 2.325, Box W70; Copy of “Erma Leroy,” in Helen Hunter et al, Houston Women from Suffrage to City Hall, 17-18, in Winegarten Papers, 2.325, Box W70; Davidson, “Negro Politics and the Rise of the Civil Rights Movement in Houston, Texas,” 47-48. Davidson’s Table 4 includes Moses LeRoy as a candidate for County Commission in 1948, but there is no further elaboration in the text, nor have I found other evidence of Moses’s candidacy.

112 Caption of photograph “Living Founders of the Alliance in Houston,” in Twentieth Convention of the National Alliance of Postal Employees program, August 20-24, 1951, Houston, Cook Papers, CAH, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 3. For more background on Sweatt and the founding of the NAPE, see Martin
Sweatt men, Byron Cook worked at the post office, and Rannie also did a stint as a mail clerk during the World War II. She was dismissed after constant fighting with her boss, after which she attempted to get her job back through the union. The effort failed because she was classified as a temporary worker. Still, the experience did not embitter her but rather made her an even more vocal advocate for postal workers, culminating in her election to the presidency of the local Ladies’ Auxiliary to the NAPE by 1947. For his part, Byron began working intermittently at the post office in 1939. He was a stolid union supporter who by 1950 served as chairman of the local Alliance’s Welfare Committee, the key group within the union that was charged with monitoring working conditions and processing shop floor grievances. In 1946, he served as the Houston Alliance’s reporter and chaired its public relations committee, a body that also included Heman Sweatt. The local union’s “Annual Alliance Day” that year celebrated its thirty-third anniversary under the theme “Two Wars but No Peace—Why?” Lulu White joined speakers from the CIO, AFL, and Texas Civil Rights Congress on the day’s program. In 1951 Cook helped organize the national NAPE convention in Houston, serving as a lead

Mayfield, Jr., “The Alliance Story: Fifty Years of Progress,” 1967; “Alliance Pioneer Passes,” The Postal Alliance, n.d. [March 1954], 23; and “Postal Employees Make Great Contributions to Civil Rights,” The Postal Alliance, July 1950, 1, 4-6—all collected in Cook Papers, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 4. For a new, thorough history of African Americans’ participation in postal unionism that also locates the Sweatt case within the broader Houston NAPE and NAACP left, see Philip F. Rubio, There’s Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

113 Letter from W. C. Jason Jr. to “Mr. Chairman,” Richard Lillie, n.d. [1946], Cook Papers, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 2; correspondence between Rannie Cook and Post Office officials, November 23, 1945 and April 20 and 24, 1946, Cook Papers, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 2; Letter from Rannie Cook to Mrs. Floy W. Johnson, March 19, 1947, Cook Papers, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 2.
usher and coordinator of badges, an unglamorous and seemingly insignificant job that nonetheless determined who got in and who was kept out of the conference.\textsuperscript{114}

Active participation in the NAPE led the Cooks into the broader civil rights movement and its principal organizations, the NAACP and Progressive Party. At least one member of the couple attended the state conventions of the NAACP in 1947 and 1948. Rannie served as a co-chairman of the Houston branch’s 1947 membership campaign, became Acting Secretary for the state conference’s Board of Directors meeting in Galveston in September 1948, and was twice elected as a board member of the local chapter by January 1949.\textsuperscript{115} The couple joined the Progressive Party campaign, and one or both served as block workers for Wallace. In May 1948, Rannie received a letter identical to the one addressed to Moses LeRoy, except that it listed a different group of key contacts in her neighborhood so they could get together and organize a get out the vote effort in Precinct 48. Her name also appeared on the ballot as an elector for the party, a position that failed to materialize when Truman carried the state. A partial handwritten note scribbled by one of the Cooks on a blank party precinct and county delegate notary form highlights both the energy of Houston’s Progressive campaign and

\textsuperscript{114} Byron Cook, “Plea for Advancement,” June 15, 1965, 2, Cook Papers, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 2; Letter from Byron Cook, Welfare Committee, to Granville W. Elder, Postmaster, March 25, 1950, Cook Papers, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 2; miscellaneous correspondence related to discipline and grievances in Cook Papers, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 2; Annual Alliance Day Program, Thirty-Third Anniversary, October 28, 1946, Houston, Cook Papers, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 4; “Convention Committee” in Twentieth Convention of the National Alliance of Postal Employees program, August 20-24, 1951, Houston, Cook Papers, CAH, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 3.

its connections to earlier civil rights organizing: “This reminds me of the beginners meeting of the NAACP—100 members...”

In fact, Rannie Cook may have exceeded her husband in her public advocacy on behalf of labor and civil rights—just as Erma LeRoy at times appeared more visibly than did her husband Moses. While Byron’s activism focused on the shop floor, Rannie took her dismissal from the post office as an opportunity to expand her horizons into the NAACP, Progressive Party, and beyond. It was she who became a local NAACP officer, and her name was the one that appeared on the ballot. She also ran Cook’s Book & Gift Shop at 3705 Lyons Avenue, in the heart of the working-class Fifth Ward. The store appears to have been more of a lending library and political clearinghouse than a for-profit enterprise. Texts included pamphlets on fair employment and civil rights produced by the CIO, the federal government, and other organizations. One Office of War Information booklet advertised “The United Nations’ Fight for the Four Freedoms” outlined by President Roosevelt. Readers likely would have also found copies of the Postal Alliance, the official organ of NAPE, the NAACP’s Crisis, and the Informer and other black newspapers. The store may even have carried some of the “Great Books” that Byron Cook listed on a small sheet of paper clipped to a copy of the Daily Worker: Marx’s Das Kapital was first, followed by Homer’s Odyssey and the names of Renaissance philosophers Montaigne and Machiavelli.  

116 Letter from Progressive Party to Dear Friend (Precinct 48), May 25, 1948; National Committee for Wallace Canvasser’s Guide; folder labeled “BLOCKWORKER”; Letter from Pearl Fox to Mrs. Rannie Cook, August 12, 1948; partial handwritten note on blank party precinct and county delegate notary form; miscellaneous Progressive Party minutes—all in Cook Papers, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 1.  
Rannie Cook’s acts alone indicate a surprisingly high degree of activism for a married woman in the 1940s, but her own words on the role of women in the fight for racial and economic justice prove even more incendiary. As President of the local Ladies Auxiliary to NAPE in 1947, Cook also served as a member of the executive committee of the national women’s body within the union and as a diplomat to Houston’s Alliance men. A modest resolution in her care called on the men’s branch to support the women’s auxiliary generally and practically in the form of a small, fifty dollar contribution. Around the same time she wrote what appears to be a speech titled “What We, As Women, Owe to Our Group.” In it, Cook called on the wives and daughters of postal workers to become better informed and become advocates for NAPE members and all black people. “A tremendous task lie [sic] ahead for our group,” she writes,

but until we become integrated into the scope of this political situation as to how it affects you, me, and my next door neighbor, we can not hope to survive....What can we do? Incorporate ourselves with militant organizations such as the NAACP. Come in to the Auxiliary to the NAPE. Cease to feel that charming socks and baking a pie constitutes being a good wife... Our men need support, we as fighting women can give it to him [sic] in the Auxiliary to the NAPE. Come out and hear the program. Study their problems. And believe me ladies as a Comrade and former co-worker of theirs they are many. Whether he admits it to you or not, the problems are many...  

Working-class women like Rannie Cook and Erma LeRoy are difficult to find in the historical record. Their voices are even more elusive. Cook’s plea combines maternalism with militancy and separate spheres with feminist radicalism. Her words do

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similar stamps could be found on printed materials and clippings throughout the collection, especially in Folder 8. Byron Cook, “Great Books,” n.d., handwritten note, Cook Papers, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 8.  
118 Rannie Cook, “What We, As Women, Owe to Our Group,” n.d. [ca. 1947], Cook Papers, 2.325, Box A124a, Folder 2.
not necessarily reflect the attitudes of women like Erma LeRoy and the countless other women among the civil rights unionists of Houston, but they do shed light on the profound, diverse implications of the movement. While the struggle prioritized issues of race and class, it also created space for new discussions about the role of women and gender in America. To be sure, black women’s activism was not entirely new. But Cook’s statement highlights with considerable clarity the novel, radical connections being made among working-class women of color who became politicized during the heightened labor and civil rights uprisings of the 1930s and 1940s.

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The LeRoys, Cooks, and other NAACP and Progressive Party activists in Houston were not alone in charting new territory in the field of civil rights unionism. As noted above, African American workers across Texas joined available unions, fought for access to skilled jobs and improvements on the shop floor, and combated discrimination within the growing labor movement. Still, the strongest bastion of black labor power remained along the waterfront, where racial segregation produced unexpected and seemingly contradictory results. Separation allowed for the fluorescence of all-black locals that elected outspoken, talented African American union leaders who advocated racial justice inside the all-black union hall while partnering with white labor leaders on job-related issues on the docks. The black unionists did not demand the integration of the unions, but they expected and received fair representation on the job. This limited cooperation with their fraternal all-white locals taught the white workers that they had more to gain from organizing alongside African Americans rather than excluding them.
entirely. Most important, separation meant that local black leaders could retain their autonomous base instead of competing for scarce positions in a single, biracial, and in most cases majority-white union. Ironically, the absolute segregation of waterfront labor allowed for the development of “civil rights unionism” among African Americans. By the late 1940s, their elected leaders used their unique position to fight for democracy in the state labor movement.

Houston’s black longshoremen joined ILA Local 872, which shared the work with white Local 1273 and offered the highest wages available to relatively unskilled African Americans. While the pay was good, the quantity of work remained sporadic, even during the labor shortages wrought by World War II. Black dock workers responded by banding together to form the all-black Hod Carriers and Common Laborers Local 18, a union aimed at winning representation and wages for general unskilled construction jobs. Freeman Everett, a president of Local 872 in this period, paralleled the rank and file in that he alternated between work on the docks and jobs in construction, so it made sense that he became the head of Local 18 as well.119

Everett soon became the most recognizable black labor leader in Texas in the 1940s, thanks to the concerted efforts of a statewide caucus of African American civil rights unionists. In 1946, Everett and other black delegates at the annual convention of the Texas State Federation of Labor (TSFL-AFL) in Houston sponsored a resolution

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calling on the state labor body to appoint or elect a “Negro Vice-President at large and two organizers.” The Resolutions Committee rejected the measure, but J. A. Everson, another delegate from Local 18, and Everett brought the issue to the convention floor, where it passed after the two men made arguments that the resolution was necessary in order to combat the CIO’s race-based appeals to unorganized black workers.¹²⁰ A year later the African American delegates to the state TSFL convention at the Baker Hotel in Dallas were stopped at the door by the bellman, who refused to admit them through the building’s front door. Lee Andrew Lewis, a motion picture projectionist who organized the black auxiliary union in that craft in Houston in 1937, recalled that he, Everett, and the other black delegates finally gained access to the building lobby only when accompanied by a white TSFL official, who met the African American men at the door on each day of the convention. Once inside, they proposed a constitutional revision that would create the post of 12th Vice-President specifically for the election of the “Negro Vice-President at large,” piggy-backing on the federation’s earlier creation of an 11th Vice-President for a white woman officer. The measure encountered fierce resistance and initially went down to defeat before being resurrected and passed in the final moments of the convention. Still, a motion to fill the newly created position was ruled out of order as the meeting adjourned.¹²¹

The real breakthrough came the following year at the TSFL convention in Fort Worth in 1948. In the intervening months Lewis and Everett had called a meeting of African American leaders of the ILA, the Hod Carriers, and other black unions from across Texas. Twenty-five to thirty responded to the call, and the assembled group decided to walk out of the upcoming convention if they “couldn’t get into the hotels like any other delegate.” Fort Worth’s Texas Hotel again barred the men from entering through the front door, so they entered through a clean freight elevator around the back of the building in order to register for the conference. Then they retired to the rear of a nearby barber college and held their own rump convention. They christened their group the Texas Federation Club (TFC), elected their own officers, resolved to boycott the remainder of the official TSFL gathering, and decided that they “would protest to the national [AFL] if this situation wasn’t alleviated and something done about it real quick.” A white TSFL official arranged to again escort the black delegates through the hotel lobby, but the newly emboldened TFC leaders refused to enter the hotel with an escort. So the two conventions continued to meet, separated by a few blocks but connected by a courier service that ran messages between the hotel and the rump caucus.122

With the TFC members still outside, white delegates inside the TSFL convention debated the federation’s racial future. One representative from the Hod Carriers in Dallas, probably a white business agent, proposed that the group should table the naming of the body’s first black Vice-President, but a delegate from the ILA’s white Houston Local 1273 countered with an appeal that was at once pragmatic and moralistic:

122 Lewis interview, 27-29 (both quotations on 28).
We are in a position that probably most of you people are not in. We have hundreds of good union colored men working on the same job we are every day. We learned a lesson a few years ago, that somebody’s got to learn in Texas sooner or later. If we can’t bring the colored worker up to us, he’s sure going to hold us down to him. He did it on the Houston waterfront. I am not in favor of this motion [to table the election], because if we have to deal with him every day, and he is a part of this State Federation of Labor, and if we are going to accept his per capita tax, if I am going to sit with him, and I am part of this State Federation of Labor, I think it would be unfair if I did not ask you to consider [the election a 12th Vice-President] now.

The motion to table the election failed. Moments later, the business agent from Dallas switched his tune and nominated Freeman Everett, the candidate endorsed by the TFC. Another member of 1273 seconded the nomination and Everett was elected by acclamation.123

Still, the TFC members did not return to the convention. The black delegates had submitted a resolution that called on the TSFL to reaffirm its commitment “that there shall be no discrimination, on common carriers in any place” where the organization holds its convention. The TSFL had endorsed a similar measure more than once previously, but it did not prevent the walkout that precipitated the rump convention at the barber college. So Frank Yeager, a white official of the ILA’s Gulf Coast District, pushed through a much stronger substitute resolution that made the provision of non-discriminatory “seating and servicing” meeting space a “pre-requisite” for any city that

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wished to seek the state convention, authorizing the Executive Board “to move the
convention to any other city of their choice that can thus meet these requirements.” The
fortified resolution passed, but the Texas Hotel still did not change its policy. The TFC
members remained outside until the final seconds of the conference, when Freeman
Everett arrived on the convention floor, received a badge and credentials as Vice-
President, and pledged to use his office to expand the federation’s black membership.¹²⁴

The African American delegates’ dramatic actions over several years—from their
first resolutions advocating equality to the Fort Worth walkout that culminated in the
rump convention, the formation of the Texas Federation Club, and the election of the
TSFL’s first black vice-president—permanently altered race relations within the state
labor movement. Everett made good on his promise and set out on the road, making
pitches to convince black locals to affiliate with the TSFL and even organizing new union
locals. The following year Paul Sparks’ campaign for the state federation’s presidency
paid the leaders of the black delegation to endorse Sparks and spread the word to other
TFC affiliates. Everett was reelected without incident.¹²⁵ To be sure, black members of
the TSFL remained marginal, but for the first time, they could no longer be ignored.

From these first footholds, African American unionists increasingly wielded more
influence within the labor movement, on the shop floor, and in their communities. Moses
and Erma LeRoy, Byron and Rannie Cook, R. R. Grovey, Heman Sweatt, Sid Hasgett

¹²⁴ Proceedings, 50th Convention (1948), 209-211, 235. Lewis interview, 27, credits Yeager with
coordinating the strong resolution at the Fort Worth convention (he then skips back chronologically to
narrate the formation of the TFC).
¹²⁵ Lewis interview, 30, 33-34; Proceedings of the 51st Convention of the Texas State Federation of Labor,
June 21-25, 1949, Beaumont, Texas, 143-145, 154-155 (TLA-UTA); Proceedings of the 52nd Convention of
and others all helped Lulu White build a dynamic, militant branch of the NAACP, a chapter dedicated to the dual struggles for racial and economic justice. With its victory in *Smith v. Allright*, the branch destroyed the all-white Democratic primary, and the Progressive Party challenge of 1948 forced the Democrats to finally open its doors. The civil rights unionist movement in Houston won another crowning victory when *Sweatt v. Painter* brought both educational parity and limited integration to higher education in Texas after 1950. At the same time, the rise of the TFC opened still more doors to African Americans within the labor movement. As the 1940s came to a close, there was thus ample reason for hope among those who sought democracy in the Bayou City.

**Conclusion**

The multiracial working class of urban Texas had risen, stumbled, won, lost, and gone sideways. When all the tumult ended, one legacy was crystal clear: politics would never be the same. That in turn meant that the white supremacist distribution of power, the Jim Crow hierarchies of race and labor, and even the relationship between men and women were all up in the air. African Americans had won the franchise, ethnic Mexicans had begun to organize independently of the *patrones*, and white workers had started to discover the liberalizing effects of trade unionism. Democratic Party leaders, like municipal politicians before them, took notice. Not since the Socialist Party of the World War I era had the corporate domination of local and state politics been so fundamentally challenged. Now working people across the Lone Star State were on the march, joining unions, civil rights organizations, and neighborhood political campaigns. In Houston,
civil rights unionism had secured a foothold among many African Americans and a few white radicals, while in San Antonio, the seeds of autonomous multiracial collaboration were evident, even though the tide of conservative reaction in that city remained high. Liberalism was even showing signs of life in Dallas, where the Open Shop Association had finally failed to maintain its absolute stranglehold on industrial relations. And in a few cases, women like Emma Tenayuca, Mrs. Zepeda, Erma LeRoy, and Rannie Cook were taking the lead.

All this progress notwithstanding, Texas remained a far from democratic place. Most working people—whether they were black, brown or white—still struggled to make ends meet. The prospects for improving their economic condition remained dim. Very few, no more than a drop in the bucket, went to the polls on election day. Despite the powerful challenges levied by civil rights and labor activists in the urban areas, white elites continued to dominate at both the municipal and state levels. The existing power relations of the 1920s had not been significantly altered. But for organizers like Moses LeRoy of Houston, G. J. Sutton of San Antonio, and the omnipresent George Lambert, the struggle was nowhere near over. Each of them had, as a Hill Country rancher might say, “earned his spurs” in the labor and political campaigns of the Great Depression and World War II. What the future would hold was anybody’s guess. But whether they knew it or not, several seeds in a larger struggle for democracy in Texas had already been planted.
Chapter 2 - Texan Apartheid: Repression & Resistance in the 1950s

Introduction

IT WAS the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way- in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.¹

Charles Dickens’ classic description of prosperity and poverty in late eighteenth century England seldom makes an appearance in American history textbooks, yet it aptly summarizes the crossroads at which working people found themselves in the United States in the middle of the Twentieth Century. The depravity of financial collapse and the dark days of World War had given way to a period of relative peace, stability, and economic growth. Servicemen returned and started families. Women left the factory floor and made newly-built suburban houses into homes. Rising real wages put meat on the barbecue, while weekends off gave working men time for golf, baseball, hunting, and fishing. America had triumphed, and her citizens now reaped the benefits of being the leaders of the free world.

It was indeed the best of times for those Americans who lived out this fairy tale, but most Americans did not. It was among the worst of times for African Americans and ethnic Mexicans who still struggled to survive even after doing their part in the fight for

democracy abroad. Black men and women had won the right to vote but could not exercise it, and those few who won skilled positions during the War were forced back into the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs to make room for returning white GIs. Steady work also remained a mirage for most ethnic Mexicans, women and men who floated in and out of industrial and agricultural pursuits and slowly migrated to the cities in search of the good life. Like African Americans, they remained the last hired and the first fired. Women of each ethnic group, including whites, remained several steps below their male counterparts on their respective, racially-specific totem poles.

Nightmarish segregation largely determined both the daily patterns and future prospects of urban life. Most restaurants, hotels, parks, and other public places remained off limits for poor African Americans and ethnic Mexicans. If members of either group somehow managed to get ahead, they still could not move to a new home outside the barrio or ghetto. Their children could not attend the best schools. And they stood no chance when they hoped to elect one of their own to uplift their decaying neighborhoods—at-large districts all but guaranteed that white elites perennially dominated local and state politics.

Although the seeds of the movement for democracy had been ably planted, they nonetheless failed to germinate immediately. The chill of the Cold War destroyed only a handful of the new unions, but almost all that survived only managed to limp along. Communists and other radicals, who had proven themselves steady allies of African American and ethnic Mexican working people from San Antonio to Houston, increasingly struggled to prove their patriotism and soon faced repression that drove them
either underground or completely out of public life. The Ku Klux Klan began to ride again, and the defenders of white supremacy spread the word that the twin dangers of the red menace and civil rights threatened to topple the American way of life. When verbal intimidation failed, physical terror and legal injunctions served as effective tools to thwart black and brown ambition. Even white workers at times found their modest aspirations curtailed. Their unions made little headway in politics, new organizing was near impossible, and even small strikes became protracted struggles. One union became cannon fodder for a red-baiting business-friendly governor who repeatedly and effectively blasted labor in order to hold off a populist challenger.

Yet while the “noisiest authorities” praised all good and denounced all evil in “superlative” terms, their rhetoric masked the fact that the apartheid system that had long defined life in Texas was in fact crumbling around them. Even as Cold War repression destroyed much of the dynamism of the civil rights unionist movement that grew during the Depression and World War II, working people in remote corners of Texas developed their own organically-radical vision that combined labor and civil rights organizing into a single struggle. While mainstream union and race leaders turned their back on the more expansive movement of earlier days, this multiracial group of packinghouse workers in Fort Worth offered an alternative path forward.

More commonly, the seeds of the movement for democracy in Texas appeared to be dormant. But just below the surface they secretly shot out roots in all directions. From time to time, a single leaf would suddenly emerge from the barren soil. Throughout the 1950s, black, brown, and white working people across the Lone Star
State reacted to constant repression by redirecting their energy into new venues and intermittently staging dramatic acts of resistance. Few of their individual acts amounted to much, but collectively they carried forward the lessons of the 1930s and 40s and set the stage for a new wave of mass upheaval. Each new leaf engendered brief, explosive, and often inconclusive conflicts with the white supremacist atmosphere into which it emerged.

The repeated assaults on segregation, as well as its proponents’ perpetual shoring up of Jim Crow, challenged the white supremacist culture at its core and fatally weakened it. On a more practical level, black, brown, and white activists slowly and fitfully created many of the networks and institutions that would soon underlie a wholesale transition toward democracy.

**The Cold War on Labor and Civil Rights**

Across Texas, civil rights unionists experienced the emerging Cold War as though it were a noose slowly tightening around their necks. The narrowing of the political field began even before the fighting ended. In 1941, as noted in chapter one, Governor “Pappy” O’Daniel ushered the state’s first anti-labor bill through the Legislature, setting the stage for the passage over the next decade of a string of new laws, all designed to curtail the burgeoning labor movement.

Such external pressure coincided with rising anti-communist sentiments within the ranks of organized labor, initially inchoate feelings that soon resulted in the complete removal of the movement’s radical elements. Murray Polakoff’s 1955 political science
dissertation includes this tale of “bitter factional struggle,” drawing upon interviews with and documents produced by anti-communist leaders who ultimately won control of the Texas State CIO Council. According to Polakoff, the “pro-communist group, although a minority,” dominated the Council from shortly after its 1937 founding through the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June, 1941. This radical leadership included the local and state officers of the National Maritime Union (NMU); West Coast longshoremen’s representative and future Communist Party officer Ruth Koenig; the ethnic Mexican leaders of the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers Union; labor lawyer Arthur Mandell; and radical caucuses within the Oil Workers and Steel Workers organizing committees.²

Most of organized labor initially opposed American military involvement in Europe, Polakoff writes, but the “pro-communist group” continued to toe the Party line even as most other factions within the movement warmed to idea of defense mobilization and the jobs it provided. In May 1940, Council leaders adopted an NMU resolution condemning the war “as an imperialistic one,” and later that year the group sent a delegation to the Emergency Peace Mobilization in Chicago. But they abruptly reversed course immediately after the attack on mother Russia.

² Murray Polakoff, “The Development of the Texas State C.I.O. Council” (Ph.D., Columbia University, 1955), 141-143, notes 20-23. “West Coast longshoremen” is a colloquial term for the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU), the initially independent organization that broke away from the ILA following the San Francisco General Strike of 1934. Despite having similar radical politics, the dissident elements in the Texas ILA failed to build coalitions with both the NMU and the ILWU. See Gilbert Mers, Working the Waterfront: the Ups and Downs of a Rebel Longshoreman (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988). Mandell was the future chairman of the Progressive Party of Texas (see chapter one). The “Oil Workers and “Steel Workers organizing committees” later became the Oil Workers International Union and the United Steelworkers of America, respectively. P. F. Kennedy was the key “pro-communist” Steel Worker who led the Council as Executive Secretary from 1938 to 1942. Polakoff adds that the pecan shellers, UCAPAWA Local 172, “was also pro-communist but did not exert too much influence on the outcome of the factional struggle” (quotation in note 21, p. 142).
Polakoff’s own anti-communist sympathies jump off the page in his account of what happened next: “The entry of the Soviet Union into World War II exposed the slavish adherence of the American communists to the national interests of that country... [T]he sharp reversal of the pro-communist faction after June, 1941, exposed their ideological nakedness for all to see.”

The anti-communist elements of the large Oil Worker locals had already mobilized to remove first their own radical members and then to sponsor a series of changes to the Council constitution that reapportioned representation in favor of the organization’s largest affiliates. In August, 1941, when the pro-communist leaders sponsored a new resolution supporting the war against fascism, “the hypocrisy of the Maritime Union delegates was a little too hard to swallow for the moment and the Council defeated the resolution.” After the Pearl Harbor attack in December, 1941, the two factions temporarily unified in support of the war effort, but “once victory over the fascist powers appeared secure,” Polakoff writes, the ascendant anti-communist group “smashed the influence of the pro-communist faction once and for all in 1944 and 1945.”

Oil worker W. M. Akin, “a militant anti-communist,” became the Council’s secretary, while the national CIO sent “anti-communist hatchet man” Tim Flynn to Texas to assist him. Polakoff concludes, “The Council possesses the notable distinction of cleansing itself from the taint of communism some five to six years before such an operation was performed by its parent operation...”

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4 Ibid., 156.
5 Ibid., 158.
6 Ibid., 158 (first and second quotations in note 72; third quotation in note 74). Polakoff cites a statement by George Lambert as one source that argued that Flynn came with the "express purpose of weeding out the
This tidy, ideologically-driven narrative may accurately outline the chronology of the dispute, but it obscures the gut-wrenching and in some cases disastrous effects of the “cleansing” on both the members of the mostly-white pro-communist faction and the countless African American and ethnic Mexican union members on both sides of the fence. P. F. Kennedy, the Council’s first Executive Secretary, emerged from the steel workers’ efforts to organize the Hughes Tool Company in Houston, a campaign in which the Communist Party had “helped him along.” Although he was characterized as an “idealist” and not a Party member, he was heavily “influenced” by the pro-communist faction until 1940. According to Polakoff, Kennedy’s defection to the anti-communist side resulted in the pro-communist group spreading “all sorts of wild rumors” about him, “even going so far as to inform his wife that he was philandering with other women.” Kennedy had a nervous breakdown, was confined to a state veterans hospital in 1942, and died there shortly thereafter. His successor as Executive Secretary, Clyde Ingram of the oil workers, was also an “idealist.” He was also heavily “influenced” by the pro-communist faction, especially labor lawyer Arthur Mandell. An injury on the job at Sinclair Oil “almost completely incapacitated him, leaving him severely crippled.” He left Texas for his brother’s farm in Mississippi in 1944 and was never heard from again. W.M. Akin, the first anti-communist Secretary who replaced Ingram, managed to avoid a similar fate and served with distinction in various capacities in the state and local labor movement until his retirement.

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Polakoff instead chooses the interpretation of anti-communist oil worker John Crossland.

The Attorney Mandell was not so lucky. He came to be seen as one of the pro-communist faction’s ring leaders, and in 1943-44, the Council balked at paying his fees due to his communist sympathies. Formerly counsel for several oil worker and other locals, Mandell was effectively blacklisted even after winning a U.S. Supreme Court case overturning the Manford Act, one of the Texas state anti-labor laws.8

With all undesirable elements removed, the Council leaders under Akin now slavishly toed the anti-communist line. It declared all communists and sympathizers “enemies of labor,” thereby foreclosing any and all possibilities of future collaboration. In 1947, former Council leader and longshoremen’s representative Ruth Koenig assumed the position of Secretary of the Texas Communist Party. In that capacity, she appeared before the state legislature to speak in opposition to the multiple anti-labor bills currently before the session. When the acts became law, anti-communist Council leaders “blamed” Koenig, arguing that her testimony “assur[ed] passage” of the anti-labor legislation. When she arrived at the state CIO convention that year, “she was forcibly escorted out of the building by the sergeant-at-arms.”9 Anti-communist leader Crossland later added that Koenig and former Executive Secretary Ingram were “most intimate,” a detail no doubt intended to posthumously discredit both individuals.10 The following year, in 1948, the Council followed the national CIO dictate to denounce the Progressive Party, led in

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8 Ibid, 142, note 22, and 214-222. The national CIO ultimately paid Mandell’s $5,000 invoice.
9 Ibid, 159, note 76.
10 Ibid, 142, note 22.
Texas by Arthur Mandell and supported on the ground by civil rights unionists Lulu White, Moses and Erma LeRoy, Byron and Rannie Cook, and many others.\footnote{Ibid., 159.}

If the anti-communist purge was disastrous for white radicals, it proved even more devastating for the movement’s African American and ethnic Mexican members. The CIO unions in which they wielded a significant degree of power—UCAPAWA, Mine-Mill, and the interracial NMU—all lost out in the reconfigured Texas State CIO. The small number of black workers in the oil industry lost key allies among the union’s generally hostile majority-white membership, while the much larger quantity of black workers in the steel industry found their white counterparts increasingly defensive of their tenuous monopoly on skilled positions. The goal of racial equality, never more than an aspiration, all but disappeared from the biracial industrial unions’ agendas.\footnote{See Michael R. Botson, \textit{Labor, Civil Rights, and the Hughes Tool Company} (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005) and Ernest Obadele-Starks, \textit{Black Unionism in the Industrial South} (Texas A&M University Press, 2000), chap. 4-5.}

Polakoff claims that Cold War era state CIO leaders “had to walk the ‘color’ tightrope” between the “anti-Negro sentiment of its rank-and-file membership” and the national CIO’s anti-discrimination directives, with which, Polakoff believed, they were generally sympathetic.\footnote{Polakoff, “The Development of the Texas State C.I.O. Council.”} Yet a closer look at Polakoff’s data paints a different picture. He reports in a footnote that “the worst offender on this [racial] score...is the most indigenous and oldest of the C.I.O. unions in the State, namely, the Oil Workers’ International Union.” A few instances in which black and “Latin-American” workers advanced to skilled positions during the war stood as exceptions to the general trends of

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 159.}
segregated locals and discrimination at the hands of white union members—and those few efforts resulted from the work of the “idealistic” Ingram, a supposed dupe of the communist lawyer Mandell.\textsuperscript{14}

The more general trend is one of marked change over time, a readily apparent shift from frequent efforts to achieve racial inclusion toward a policy ranging from indifference to outright exclusion. In 1936, when the incipient Council was dominated by communists, its leaders welcomed into its ranks F. Jacobs, a delegate from the segregated oil workers’ Local 254 in Port Arthur. The representatives there assembled also passed a resolution “allowing Negro members to have representation at all its future conventions.” In 1942, before the wholesale “cleansing” of the remaining white communist delegates, the Council passed a resolution in support of the FEPC’s efforts to end wartime employment discrimination. A year later in 1943, E. Martin a black steelworker from Local 2457, was so moved by the Council’s commitment to black workers that he took the floor at its annual convention to pledge his support for the CIO: “I will have a whole lot to tell my people when I go back to Houston. I want to say for the colored boys of these various plants...that we stand 100% behind you in your organizational campaign.” But two years later, in 1945, after the communist elements had been “smashed...once and for all,” E. Martin discovered that his constant support for the Council would not be reciprocated. A steelworker delegate nominated him to serve as an officer in the state body, but “other steelworker delegates asked permission to caucus, after which they nominated two other steelworkers, both white, to the Executive

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 161-166, (quotation in note 81, p.161). Polakoff discusses the upgrading on pp. 165-166, including note 90.
When black delegates at the same convention proposed the creation of a new board position for a “Negro or Latin-American” vice-president, white officers claimed that the Council did not have the power to impose such a requirement on its affiliated unions.16

By the dawn of the 1950s, the state’s labor movement had shot off its left foot and commenced running around in circles.17 The Council’s anti-communist leadership blamed its inability to withstand conservative reaction on Communists like Koenig and Progressives like Mandell and the LeRoys, making common cause with their chief political enemies, anti-labor blowhards like Governor “Pappy” O’Daniel. Inside the CIO, the two parties hurled epithets at one another, driving more than one of its top officers quite literally insane. The industrial unions continued to grow, for a time, but they lost one critical source of their dynamism. And black and brown workers were simply left out in the cold, a fact most of them would not soon forget.

The situation in the Texas State Federation of Labor, AFL, was not much more promising. After being elected the “Twelfth Vice-President” and the first African American officer of the state body, laborer Freeman Everett set out to fulfill his promise to organize black Texans into AFL unions. He began traveling the state, often accompanied by Lee Andrew Lewis, the president of the black projectionists’ union and secretary of the Texas Federation Club, the black workers’ statewide caucus. But threats of racial violence and police harassment cut their forays short, and the TSFL responded

15 Ibid. 163-164 (first and second quotations on 164; third quotation in note 88, p. 164).
16 Ibid, 167.
17 I borrow the left foot and circling metaphor from Dana Frank’s lectures on the subject in her “Labor and the Working Class” history course, University of California, Santa Cruz, Winter 2003.
by cutting off funding for their travels, largely grounding them. This retreat from organizing black workers left East Texas much like Everett and Lewis had found it: unorganized and constantly vulnerable to white supremacist terror.

At the annual conventions of the TSFL in 1949, Everett enthusiastically reported on the progress he had made during his first year as vice-president. “It has been my highest ambition to render the type of service that would reflect credit to the federation,” he began his initial annual address. From his base in Houston, he first met with the officials of more than a dozen African American unions across the Upper Texas Gulf Coast, from Galveston fifty miles to the south to Beaumont and Port Arthur nearly ninety miles east. With Lee Lewis and perhaps a small subsidy for gas money from the TSFL, Everett went to the piney woods of far East Texas to meet with a “mixed group of Negroes and Whites” in the Lumber and Saw Mill Workers. Each group promised to pay their per capita dues to the Federation and attend the next annual convention. Everett and Lewis then set their sights still deeper into the state’s Black Belt, traveling nearly two hundred miles toward Athens to meet with the all-black Brick and Clay Workers Auxiliary Labor Union.

On the way the pair took an unexpected detour. Everett’s report is worth quoting at length:

I was not instructed to go into Elgin, but a few days before I was scheduled to be in Athens, the General Representative of the United Brick and Clay Workers of American called me long distance from San Antonio and asked that while in the area, I visit Elgin because I was very much needed there. In Elgin I found a very difficult situation. One or two men own the brick yards there and also a large part of the town. They provide living quarters for the laborers and make provisions for the men to buy automobiles and make other expensive purchase from their stores. At the
time of the strike many of the laborers were heavily indebted to owners of the brick yard. However, in the face of all this, the laborers walked out. It is my opinion that unless something tangible is done in Elgin in the near future we will lose this strike. I suggest since all the strikebreakers are Negroes and they are coming from nearby sections, that a Negro organizer be sent to Elgin to do some missionary work.18

Long distance phone calls were not cheap in 1949. In desperation, the General Representative tracked down Everett to ask him to look in on the conflict. Addressing the largely white audience of TSFL delegates a short time after, Everett first highlights his dedicated work in and around Houston before cleverly painting a picture of destitute, racially-unmarked workers bravely striking out against the despotic owners of a faraway company town. Like their counterparts down the road in Athens, the strikers were probably a “mixed group of Negroes and Whites,” while the scabs, he notes only at the end of his speech, were all “Negroes” from “nearby sections.” By emphasizing the solidarity and courage of the probably interracial group of unionists, Everett downplays the treason of the black scabs. Doing so then allows him to offer a radical solution to the conflict, one that foregoes violence in favor of inclusion. The only way to win, he concludes, is by organizing the black strikebreakers. Finally, the task requires “missionary work,” signaling that God is surely on the side of such action.

TSFL officials eventually answered Everett’s call to send missionaries to aid the brick and clay workers. It remains unclear exactly how or when (or even if) Everett and Lewis returned to Elgin—and the company town’s exact location and spelling are also

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murky in the historical record. Still, at some point in the 1950s, Everett and Lewis returned to Elgin, probably an unincorporated area between Corsicana and Athens. Their experiences there prove both instructive and chilling. “In our group, you always contact preachers first,” Lewis later recalled, “and we talked with the good reverend up there... told him what we were up there for—that we wanted to organize the brick workers to get them some pay... He got everybody together...” The Reverend arranged a meeting, and Everett addressed the crowd in his always memorable fashion.

So at this particular meeting...Freeman, he was an orator. He could make this ashtray cuss. He was really a psychologist, and he could really work you up emotionally—but when we came out, there was a guy standing there with one of these big Texas hats on—pistols and sidearms sagging down, and he says, “Which one of you Niggers is Freeman Everett, and which one of you is Lee Lewis?”...Then he says, “Hiya, Mr. So-and-so; hiya Mr. So-and-so.” You know how those things go.

19 Everett’s annual report in 1949 lists the town as “Elgin,” and there is no reference to the strike or local union in Everett’s 1950 convention report. The tale recounted in this paragraph draws on Lee Lewis’s oral history interview with George N. Green. Lewis spells it out as “Elgen” and says that the events took place in a small company town near Corsicana, which is located approximately 55 miles south of Dallas and thirty-five miles to the west of Athens—Everett’s planned destination in 1949. Lewis confirms that the events did not take place in the Central Texas city of Elgin, located just east of Austin. Both Elgin and the Corsicana-Athens corridor are centers of brick production and home to present-day plants owned by the Texas behemoth Acme Brick Company (the latter is in the city of Malakoff). Nothing named “Elgen” appears in Google or Google Maps searches. It is possible that the town mentioned in Everett’s 1949 report is entirely distinct from the location noted in Lewis’s oral account, but that would be a surprising coincidence. Lewis does not mention a separate brick workers union in Elgin (near Austin).

20 The exact timing of the events also remains unclear. Everett’s first trip to “Elgin” took place shortly before he gave his report to the state TSFL convention in 1949. At the same gathering, Lewis recalled, the duo organized black delegates in support of carpenter Paul Sparks’ successful campaign for Executive Secretary, the federation’s top staff position. After his election, Sparks made Everett and Lewis “roving ambassadors” to black workers across the state—including sending them to “Elgen” (p. 33). But later in the interview, Lewis states that the duo traveled the state together intermittently for approximately five years, split before and after the 1957 merger of the state AFL and CIO organizations (roughly 1954-59; p.55). My copies of the convention proceedings do not clear up the chronology. Rather, to add to the confusion, they show that Lewis ran against Everett for Negro Vice-President in 1951, but the incumbent beat him by a 6-to-1 margin. The following year Lewis placed Everett’s name into nomination, suggesting that any rift that had divided the two men had been amicably resolved (Proceedings from 1951 and 52). Everett remained vice president up until 1956 but not in the merged Texas State AFL-CIO. Finally, Lewis recalled that Jerry Holleman, Sparks’ successor who took office in 1953, increased aid for their efforts before later cutting them off and grounding them due to safety concerns (pp. 36, 60).
The local lawman, probably a county Sheriff, clearly had a plan. He called out the two organizers and began addressing the rank and file workers by name—driving home the message that he knew who exactly was in attendance and therefore sympathetic to the union. All eyes likely fixated on the duo from out of town. “Freeman said, ‘I’m Freeman Everett, and this is Lee Lewis here.’” [The Sheriff] said, “By God... you Niggers from Houston coming up here are causing confusion, disturbing our Niggers. Our Niggers are happy... I’m going to take you across town and put you in jail.” He escorted the pair to Everett’s old Plymouth and then led in his squad car as the caravan proceeded toward the local lockup. But when they arrived he paused: “Now what do you want me to do?” he asked them. “Do you want me to put your black asses in jail and ... tie [the] key around a rabbit and turn it loose?” Everett said that they weren’t “trying to upset nobody’s applecart” and that they’d “much prefer going home to being put in jail.” “Okay,” the Sheriff replied. “By God, get you some gas and get in that car, and don’t come back up here disturbing our Niggers.”

They returned home, psychologically bruised but not physically beaten. Clearly, organizing black workers in a company town in 1950s East Texas remained dangerous business. Lewis recalled, “I think it was more frightening [scare] tactics than anything else, but at the time, I didn’t see it that way.” Lewis wanted to return, so Everett called in his report to the state TSFL office in Austin. Jerry Holleman, who became the Executive Secretary in 1953 but may have served on the staff in another capacity previously, said “it was best not to go back, ‘cause you might get killed or something like that—something

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21Lee A. Lewis, interview by George N. Green, OH 19, TLA-UTA, 56-57 (all quotations).
serious might happen.” Holleman instead called the union, who in turn sent in “some white guy” to continue the organizing campaign. The Sheriff “put him in the pokey in Corsicana and [gave] him a good going over,” Lewis recalled. Holleman may have been correct in his assessment of the situation: if a white man faced a beating for returning to Elgin, the two “Niggers” very likely would have faced “something serious” instead.

Everett and Lewis continued to organize despite the threat of arrest and white supremacist terror. Soon after the Elgin scare they traveled again to Silsbee, one hundred miles northeast of Houston in the pine forests of the Big Thicket. There they worked to organize approximately five hundred “Mexicans and Negroes” as well as “poor white trash” who worked in a creosote plant that converted raw pitch into a wood treatment solution for use by the Santa Fe Railroad. The workers were “so enthusiastic,” Lewis recalls, that the two organizers were caught off guard when two plain-clothed sheriff’s deputies confronted them at the end of a mass meeting near the plant. “‘This thing’s broke up,’” one officer said. “‘We’re taking you to jail.’” They took the pair to a small jail in Silsbee and then a larger facility in Beaumont, where they spent the night. Still, Lewis considered himself lucky. “Fortunately, we didn’t get a going over, but [we] were talked to pretty nasty and pretty rough.”

The story repeated itself among brick makers in Ferris, just south of Dallas. There the local sheriff “carried us to the highway...and told us they didn't want us

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22 Lewis interview, 57.
23 Lewis interview, 58. Again, this may or may not be the same group of lumber and saw mill workers that Everett listed in his report to the 1949 convention.
around."\(^{24}\) In short, everywhere they went, Everett and Lewis encountered enthusiastic workers who flocked to the unions and at times transcended divisions of race. But at each juncture, local law enforcement, probably in collusion with the employers, arrested the two organizers, sending them home to Houston and effectively crushing the workers’ unionization efforts. TSFL staffer Holleman grounded the duo soon after the Silsbee arrest, determining that it was simply too risky for the pair to continue to tempt fate out in the sticks of East Texas. Everett and Lewis limited their work to calling on local ministers in order to and urge them to support and organize black workers in their respective areas. But with neither a comprehensive program nor boots on the ground, such entreaties rarely amounted to much. They soon ceased their travels. In the early 1960s, workers in Elgin finally organized a union, suggesting that all was not lost.\(^{25}\)

Still, by limiting Everett and Lewis’s activities and cutting off their financial support, the TSFL sent a message (perhaps inadvertently) to African Americans in rural East Texas and indeed across the state. There, in what contemporaries called the “Old South” section of Texas, white supremacist violence had won. Labor’s commitment to the black worker had quite simply faltered. In the cities, most black workers continued to languish in unskilled positions, and those few that paid union dues often lacked representation in union affairs. If black workers wanted to improve their condition, they were going to have to do it themselves.

Texas labor leaders did not entirely abandon their goal of reaching out to black and ethnic Mexican workers and civil rights organizations, but the white supremacist

\(^{24}\) Lewis interview, 62-63.
\(^{25}\) Lewis interview, 60-61.
anti-communism of the Cold War continued to dictate and narrow the parameters of their overtures. The triumph and long reach of anti-communist sentiment were never clearer than in 1951, when the TSFL invited conservative Governor Allan Shivers to address its annual convention in Galveston. Shivers carefully avoided any discussion of “partisan politics” and instead focused on his vision of labor’s role in solving the pressing public policy problems of the day. His job centered on balancing the demands of myriad “special interests,” he began, including organized labor. But all such groups must subsume their demands in favor of the “public interest.” Doing so puts each lobby in line with “public opinion—and public opinion, after all, is the court of final resort in this great democracy.” Then Shivers offered his prescription for labor:

Then, and not until then, we will stop the sweep, or at least shorten the arc, of the pendulum that swings back and forth, from one extreme to the other, in matters that affect the public interest so drastically as the competition between labor and management. Note that I use the word “competition” to describe the continuing struggle between these two elements of our American way of life. I am grateful that the labor movement in Texas is predicated upon competition between equals and not upon class warfare. As a matter of fact, in my opinion, there is no such thing as “the laboring class” in this country. It may be true that one man works with his hands, another with complicated machines, another with rows of figures...Yet each of these men, in my town and yours, may live in the same general neighborhood, send his children to the same school, go to the same church, drive the same make of car, smoke the same brand of cigarettes, fish in the same creek, vote the same ticket and argue about the same governmental policies...Your political action is undertaken for the achievement of union ends—not for the advancement of an alien theory of government and economics that is antagonistic to the American way. That is why, even if they are poles apart on some issues, the American working man and his counterpart in management can always find a common meeting ground if both sides will take the trouble to look for it.26

As the Korean War raged on the other side of the planet, Shivers reminded the audience that the differences between labor and management paled in comparison to the divide between “the American way” and those who prescribe to “an alien theory of government and economics.” The greatest weapon they could mobilize against global Communism abroad and inflation at home was the magic weapon of production, and labor and capital needed to cooperate to make sure the good guys won. “It should strengthen our determination,” he concluded, “…if we remember that Joe Stalin’s great hope for this country is that we will collapse internally—as the end result of our domestic differences, our love of easy living and our reluctance to make the sacrifices necessary to keep our economic system going and thereby retain our own freedom.”

To the surprise of no one in attendance, Governor Shivers said absolutely nothing about race. Shivers hailed from Lufkin, a relatively large East Texas city located nearly equidistant between Elgin and Silsbee, where Everett and Lewis and with them all organized labor had been graciously escorted out of town by the local sheriffs. In 1948, as Lieutenant Governor, Shivers helped lead the defection of States’ Rights Democrats (or Dixiecrats) that bolted the Democratic National Convention and backed South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond after President Truman secured the passage of the party’s first civil rights plank. A year after his speech to the TSFL, in 1952, he denounced the presidential candidacy of Adlai Stevenson and secured endorsements for his reelection campaign from not only the state’s conservative Democratic party but the growing state Republican party as well. If the battle between labor and management was

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27 Ibid, 68
relatively insignificant in his view, then the struggle of blacks and ethnic Mexicans for first-class citizenship was so unimportant that it didn’t even warrant comment.

The Governor and his allied “Shivercrats” dominated Texas politics in the 1950s, and labor and civil rights organizations were forced to fall into line. The TSFL reined in its African American organizers, and the Texas State CIO Council remained firmly in the hands of staunch anti-communists.

All that remained for black working people was the NAACP, but even that storied organization soon fell victim to Cold War anti-communism and Shivercrat white supremacy. Historian Merline Pitre reports that the Houston branch’s fortune paralleled those of Lulu B. White, the chapter’s dynamic Executive Secretary and state director of branches. White lost influence in the branch soon after the Progressive Party campaign of 1948. For three years prior to the election, White had feuded with Carter Wesley, editor of the city’s most important black newspaper, over the best manner in which to pursue better educational opportunities for African Americans. Both steadfastly supported Heman Sweatt’s suit to integrate the University of Texas, but they differed on their response to the state’s decision to establish a black university and law school in Houston. White demanded complete integration of the flagship school in Austin and nothing else, while Wesley advocated both integration and the building of a separate institution.

Pitre argues that the dispute gradually escalated, with Wesley using his column to attack White in an increasingly personal manner. Most importantly, he publicly accused her of being a Communist, demanded that she resign from the branch, and hounded her
until she finally did so. In Wesley’s view, White was guilty by association. Her collaboration with white labor lawyers Arthur Mandell and his partner Herman Wright, Wesley contended, clouded the reputation of the NAACP, even though both men were members. So too did her association with the NMU, other CIO unions, and the Progressive campaign—Mandell and Wright were also active in each of these organizations. By 1947, White and Wright shared a “close friendship,” and Wright attended White’s twentieth wedding anniversary celebration. Wesley was incensed. “‘When a Communist is willing to go to Negro houses and drink liquor with them and call them by their first name, they know that as far as these white people are concerned, the race question is solved.’” The following year when Henry Wallace toured Houston, White hosted a tea for the Progressive candidate and his interracial traveling party, which included Paul Robeson, an African American singer, actor, and self-acclaimed socialist whose passport had been revoked. By 1949, Wesley grew “obsessed” with removing White from office, and she capitulated on June 13 of that year.28

White’s departure from the post of Executive Secretary did not entirely remove her from the organization, but it did effectively gut the Houston branch. White remained the state director of branches, and in 1950, she briefly worked as a field organizer for the regional office. In Houston, branch president Rev. L. H. Simpson elevated White’s administrative assistant, Christia V. Adair, to the post of Executive Secretary. Pitre reports that White hired Adair in 1946 in hopes of grooming her to become White’s

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28 Merline Pitre, In Struggle Against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 72-78, 89-104, 112-114 (first and second quotations on 73, quoting Wesley’s Informer; third quotation on 102).
successor, “but the two parted company after a few years because of personality conflicts and political and philosophical differences.” Adair resented White’s pro-communist sympathies as well as her meddling in branch affairs after her resignation. The local executive board members split into two factions, one loyal to White and the other to the combination of Simpson and Adair. Most civil rights unionists and indeed most ordinary members likely remained in White’s camp as branch membership dropped from 6,975 in 1949 to 1,315 in 1950, the first year of Adair’s administration. The rift between the two groups grew steadily, and the local civil rights movement suffered even as its lawyers continued to pile up victories in court. In 1953, national NAACP officials investigated the situation and resolved that Adair was both “inefficient” and “incompetent,” and they instructed White to lead a new membership campaign. White’s effort proved successful but further isolated Adair and Simpson. The executive board soon ceased functioning. In her capacity as state director, White worked with national officials to rewrite the chapter’s constitution and bylaws, and she planned to take the leadership mantle of the reformed branch. But in December 1954, Simpson preempted the outsiders’ efforts by hastily calling new elections in which he was re-elected through countless irregularities. Gloster Current of the New York office attempted to sack Adair the following spring, but Simpson managed to save both her job and his own post. White remained a leader of the dissident faction, officially an outsider but informally synonymous with the NAACP

29 Ibid, 114-118 (quotation on 118).
among most African Americans in Houston and across the state. Moses and Erma LeRoy and other civil rights unionists remained loyal to White until her death in 1957.30

Thus, the Houston branch—formerly one of the Association’s largest and most active—was already on the decline when it faced the second half of the Cold War’s one-two punch. According to historian Michael L. Gillette, in September 1956, state Attorney General (and Shivercrat) John Ben Shepperd declared war on the NAACP in a last ditch effort to salvage his shaky political career and to bolster efforts to prevent the impending desegregation of schools that fall.31 Led by a former FBI agent, Shepperd’s men conducted surprise simultaneous raids on the association’s offices in Houston and Dallas, seizing the chapter and regional offices’ files and financial records but generally failing to obtain membership lists. The Attorney General’s office soon secured “a temporary restraining order that barred the NAACP from doing business in Texas.”32 Shepperd moved the proceedings to Tyler, in remote northeast Texas, summoning the African American leaders of various local chapters to travel long distances onto his home turf. There he surprised them with courts of inquiry featuring harsh interrogation by Texas Rangers followed by a spectacle hearing in front of a mob of white Citizens Council members. The State accused the Association of violating its charter and tax status by engaging in political activities, but NAACP lawyers maintained that branch members engaged in politics only as individuals and without coordination from the state or national offices.

30 Ibid, 118-126 (both quotations on 124).
32 Ibid, chap. 8 (quotation on p. 293).
Ironically, Christia Adair, who for years had frustrated her superiors with her poor record-keeping and brash independence, now became the defense’s star witness. She testified that she could not turn over the branch’s membership list because she did not maintain one, and she demonstrated clearly that neither New York nor the state office in Dallas exerted control over activities in Houston, political or otherwise. Just as she had previously refused to cooperate with Lulu White and national NAACP officials, she now defiantly resisted the State’s questioning over sixteen days on the witness stand. Her intransigence gained her notoriety in the black press and among NAACP officials, reversing some of the damage done by her feud with White. Her own celebrity increased, but her remarkable testimony did not stop the State’s war on the Association. Rather, the presiding judge accepted every portion of the Attorney General’s suit and upheld the injunction banning the NAACP. The following spring the court, in consultation with the Association’s New York office, handed down a decision that allowed the Texas chapters to resume activity but only under the close scrutiny of the Attorney General’s office. NAACP lawyers accepted the decision as a compromise by the State, and they further agreed that an appeal was impossible. Yet statewide membership had fallen by more than fifty percent, so the New York office launched an appeal in order to make a public display of independence rather than admitting defeat. The group’s Texas leaders resigned in protest, and the national officers eventually reversed their decision to appeal. Many of the erstwhile leaders never returned. In 1962, national NAACP staffer Gloster
Current remarked that the Association was still recovering from the 1956 injunction. It would never be the same.\textsuperscript{33}

When the dust finally settled, the most important remaining institution of the civil rights unionist movement had been destroyed. Lulu White died in 1957, and the NAACP largely died with her.

For his part, Freeman Everett remained a vice-president of the TSFL until the state body merged with the Texas State CIO Council in 1957. But Cold War anti-communism and white supremacist violence had long since curtailed his activities and aspirations. Everett, Lewis, and other members of the Texas Federation Club continued to push for integrated hotels and convention sites, even after the elimination of Everett’s position during the merger of the two rival labor organizations. The Club fizzled away until it dissolved entirely in 1962.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{An Alternate Vision: Fort Worth’s Packinghouse Workers}

Meanwhile, nearly three hundred miles to the northwest in Fort Worth, a group of African American, ethnic Mexican, and white workers—men and women—seemingly ignored the pressures of the rising Cold War as they developed an alternative movement culture. They did not confine their efforts to either a narrow, classless and ostensibly color-blind labor struggle nor an anemic civil rights agenda. Instead, the diverse group of workers came together across racial lines, demanded power in their union, and then committed their organization to an expansive struggle for civil rights. They forged their

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid (quotation on 332); Pitre, \textit{In Struggle Against Jim Crow}, 126.

\textsuperscript{34} Lewis interview, 70. Also see the Lee A. Lewis Papers, AR154, TLA-UTA.
own organically-radical version of civil rights unionism that melded workplace activism with the battle against Jim Crow.

Significantly, this alternative emerged at the precise moment that Cold War anticommunism had triumphed throughout the labor and civil rights movements. The Texas State CIO Council had purged its radical elements, the TSFL had welcomed Governor Shivers’ vision of labor-management cooperation in a classless society, and red-baiting had all but destroyed the NAACP. Yet in Fort Worth a multiracial group of dedicated organizers developed an expansive civil rights unionist agenda and made it the foundation of their institution and movement. Their successful battle against white supremacist anti-communism reveals that organized labor did not always limit their demands to fit within the constraints of the so-called “Cold War consensus,” and it further suggests that such a consensus did not actually exist. Rather, the activities of the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) in Fort Worth demonstrate the depth of grassroots resistance that persisted despite Cold War repression while also shedding light on the much wider range possibilities that were in fact available to labor and civil rights leaders throughout the 1950s. The UPWA shows in microcosm what might have been possible on a much larger scale. Organized labor writ large could have followed the contemporary example being set by a small group of ordinary Texan men and women laboring in an industrial outpost in the heart of the segregated South, men and women who made their union into a civil rights organization—and won.

Though nearby by present-day standards, the stockyards and meatpacking plants of Fort Worth were both geographically and culturally distinct from its better-known rival
city of Dallas. If the latter remained a quintessentially Southern city, Fort Worth imagined itself as the place “where the West begins.” Its stockyards did in fact depend upon imports from the mythic West, and Twentieth Century cowboys frequented its streets as they brought their cattle to the yards for slaughter. Fort Worth also served as a staging ground and refuge for oil wildcatters and tycoons as that industry gradually moved from its origin in East Texas to the Panhandle and high plains in the western half of the state.

Yet the African American residents of the city saw Fort Worth as anything but a “racial frontier.” Rather than freeing them from the constraints of Jim Crow, Fort Worth offered African Americans the same segregated social and occupational structure as did its rival. The common Southern stories of Jim Crow indignities dominate the life histories of Fort Worth’s black residents—narrators frequently described passing white schools during long commutes to their own separate schools, and stories of overt white racism and at times violence and terror are not uncommon. Segregated neighborhoods were nearly absolute, but they were often small and spread out geographically throughout Tarrant County. Unlike their counterparts in Houston, where a substantial black population offered greater opportunities for mutual support, community building, and at times mass organization, the relatively small numbers of African Americans in and around Fort Worth could not afford to only look inward. Survival, to say nothing of sweeping social change, required that they leave their own communities in search of the few good jobs available to them. In short, black workers there remained at least as disadvantaged as their counterparts across Texas and indeed all of urban America.
Just as black Houstonians found some salvation in heavy industry and on the
waterfront, African Americans in Fort Worth gained hope by securing a foothold in the
city’s large meatpacking industry. It was a bloody grasp. Black men largely served on
the plants’ killing floors, where they butchered the stock by hand into large chunks that
were then passed along to other departments for more delicate processing. Women
generally performed these latter tasks, with some departments reserved for white women
and others designated to African Americans. White men performed skilled tasks and
supervised. A handful of ethnic Mexican men and women joined the ranks of the
unskilled, where they occupied a somewhat fluid gray area between blacks and whites—
the particular conditions of segregation varied widely by plant, department, and even
shift, but ethnic Mexicans consistently remained second-class.

* * *

The UPWA first organized the stockyards and packers of Fort Worth near the
conclusion of World War II, but civil rights unionist sentiments within the union did not
begin to develop until the early 1950s. They did so thanks to a unique confluence of
national, regional, and local factors. Unlike most affiliates of the CIO, the UPWA at the
international level had survived the red scare of the late 1940s relatively unscathed. Its
leadership complied only minimally with the Taft-Hartley Act, as most officers signed
anti-Communist affidavits while a few known Communists quietly resigned. Ralph
Helstein, the international president, faced constant criticism that he was secretly a
Communist, but several investigations of such charges failed to produce concrete
evidence of his membership in the Party and never secured his ouster. Unlike the other
“left-led unions” in the CIO, the UPWA thereby managed to retain its position as the industry’s largest collective bargaining agent while avoiding both expulsion from the federation and a mass internal purge of radical activists. Civil rights unionism remained largely intact, at least at the international union’s headquarters in Chicago.

Closer to home, the UPWA’s Fort Worth office served as a union hall not only for the several nearby locals but also as regional headquarters for the union’s District 8, a vast area that included all of Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and eventually portions of Kansas. A. J. Pittman, a white Texan, served as the elected District Director and led a small, all-white staff who serviced the union’s far-flung existing membership in addition to carrying out sporadic new organizing efforts. Yet the District remained a loose amalgamation that provided little cohesion to its disparate local affiliates. Racial practices on the shop floor and in the local unions varied widely, despite mandates from Chicago that all units operate on an integrated basis.

Pittman resented the intrusion of what he saw as wild-eyed leftists among the UPWA international leadership into the uniquely Southern problem of black civil rights. In 1948, he ran for Vice-President of the international union against G.R. “Butch” Hathaway, a candidate close to Helstein with similar political sympathies. Pittman accused his opponent, Helstein, and other international officers of being Communists, but he ultimately failed to win the election. Back at his post in District 8, Pittman accepted both the Jim Crow division of labor and various segregated customs within local unions and factories. He preferred not to rock the boat on racial issues, and he advocated gradual change at best. More often, he deferred to the white supremacist mores that
predominated among most of the union’s white members, allowing segregation to continue unchallenged. While it occasionally paid lip service to civil rights in mixed company, the regional office under Pittman’s leadership more often reflected the culture of its oldest and most venerated local unit, the “lily-white” Local #59 at the Fort Worth Stockyards. A symbol at once of both the mythic Old West and the industrial revolution in meat packing, the yards remained a stronghold of white men who wore cowboy hats and fiercely defended their exclusive access to the best, manliest jobs in town.

Less than a mile away from the yards, however, a vastly different culture developed on the floor of Armour & Co.’s main regional plant, home to UPWA Local #54. With more than 1,400 members, Local 54 was the largest single unit and therefore the flagship local in the District. Along with another sizable unit at Swift, the two locals set the standard for union contracts throughout Texas and the Southwest. Both were organized in Chicago, where Helstein and UPWA’s rank and file bargaining committees negotiated national master contracts that eventually covered all of the production facilities of each major packing chain. Thanks to these agreements, the union came to the Fort Worth plants soon after World War II and successfully organized the pair of locals without employer interference. By the early 1950s both functioned as typical union locals, notable only for the large number of black members in comparison to other nearby groups. Although they were confined to the killing floors and other dirty and unsafe jobs, African Americans joined the packinghouse locals en masse and readily reaped all the benefits of the UPWA contract. Black, white, and ethnic Mexican workers in Local 54—women and men—maintained what historian Rick Halpern calls a “fragile alliance” that
allowed for cooperation surrounding labor issues on the shop floor but lacked agreement when it came to broader questions of combating white supremacy.35

George Thomas, a young African American worker from Eureka, Texas, emerged as the rank and file leader of this local coalition. Thomas had long worked as a beef lugger on the Armour loading docks and was instrumental in organizing Local 54 when the union came to Fort Worth during World War II. His leadership on the shop floor won him respect throughout the plant and propelled him to the local’s presidency beginning in the late 1940s.36 Eddie Humphrey, a black officer of the local, estimated that 90% of whites in the local supported Thomas. “…For whites to support a black like they did George Thomas was just unheard of,” Humphrey said, “you just didn’t find that very often here in the Deep South.” Thomas’ charisma and organizing skills combined to win him this unlikely constituency. Humphrey adds, “And what the man had I don’t know…he could wave some kind of magic wand and the people responded to his wishes…You know some people got it and some people don’t. He had that ability to lead people…”37

Recognizing his skills, UPWA leaders in 1952 tapped Thomas to serve as a floating representative of the international union’s Organization Department. The position required that Thomas travel between locals throughout the Southwestern region while reporting directly to officers in Chicago. In creating this assignment, Halpern

37 Eddie Humphrey interview, UPWAOHP, tape 80, side 1, 04:45, 09:10.
writes, the international threw “its considerable weight behind black veteran unionists,”
offering a skilled, charismatic organizer to previously isolated UPWA members throughout the region. But at the same time the move infuriated Pittman, who resented the international officers’ meddling within the confines of District 8.38

The tenuous partnership within Local 54 and the smoldering conflict between Pittman and Chicago both exploded soon thereafter, when international union leaders, aided by rank and file members from across the country, negotiated a new master agreement with Armour & Co. Among other provisions, the contract required the complete spatial desegregation of all of the meatpacker’s plants across the country.

For the next two years, Armour Local 54 and soon all of District 8 became the battlegrounds on which members of the union’s “Anti-Discrimination Committee” and white workers organized under the banner of “Local Rights” fiercely contested the union’s racial agenda and indeed the larger meaning of trade unionism. The new contract would not immediately alter the Jim Crow division of labor, but it did promise to remove segregated bath and locker rooms, drinking fountains, and cafeteria and dining areas. Of course, such alterations symbolically cut at the core of Jim Crow. Separate facilities were never equal: relatively better amenities for whites served as a constant reminder of their imagined racial superiority and very real material privileges while dilapidated conditions

38 Halpern, “Interracial Unionism in the Southwest,” 173-174; Moses Adedeji, “Crossing the Colorline: Three Decades of the United Packinghouse Workers of America’s Crusade against Racism in the Trans-Mississippi West, 1936-1968” (Ph.D., North Texas State University, 1978), 70-71. At approximately the same time, the international transferred a radical white field representative named Steve Mauser to Fort Worth, where he could work directly with the mass of the district’s membership and continue to encourage civil rights unionists within Local 54.
in “colored” accommodations aimed to bolster African Americans’ own internalized sense of inferiority and subjugation.

These high stakes were apparent to black and white workers alike. On November 11, 1952, Armour managers removed the partition that divided the plant cafeteria lines as well as the signs designating “Whites Only” and “Colored” dining areas. In response, writes Halpern, “over 200 white workers gathered in the local union hall demanding to meet with the officers of the local union.” Local and district officers attempted to quell the white workers’ anger and fear by explaining UPWA’s national anti-discrimination policy, but their entreaties fell on deaf ears.39 The following day, the dissatisfied members leafleted the plant, calling themselves the “Local Rights Committee” and demanding the re-segregation of the cafeteria. Local Armour management buckled to this pressure and re-installed the Jim Crow signs and the partition, two days after their removal.

In turn, African American workers in the local unit of the national union’s newly-formed Anti-Discrimination (AD) Committee threatened a walkout of their own. Several years earlier, in 1948, delegates to the international UPWA convention had created an AD Department under the leadership of Russell Lasley, one of the union’s two African American international vice-presidents. The Department gave birth to a national AD Committee, which then engendered AD Committees in local and district affiliates across the country. These committees in turn sponsored and often secured the passage of a wide range of resolutions that denounced discrimination and called for the expansion of equal rights.

job opportunities, desegregation on the shop floor, and support for civil rights in the larger communities in which they lived. In most unions, and in most times and places, such resolutions remained largely symbolic, rarely affecting change beyond their inclusion in the final convention proceedings. But the UPWA was different. Helstein, Lasley, and the countless rank and file members of the union’s huge Armour chain negotiating committee took the AD resolutions seriously and incorporated the desegregation order into their 1952 master agreement with the large packer. In all likelihood, George Thomas, local officer Eddie Humphrey, and other AD Committee members in Local 54 helped aid the transition from a resolution on paper to an enforceable contract clause. They did so despite the objections of racial gradualists like District Director Pittman. The removal of the partition represented a hard-fought victory that had been a long time coming. AD Committee members in Local 54 had upped the ante, and they weren’t turning back. They demanded that the company overlook the white workers’ protest and implement the integration provisions of the contract.

Caught between the two warring factions of union members, Armour management called Helstein for help. The UPWA international president sided with the black workers and demanded that the firm enforce the new contract’s desegregation order. Armour again removed the cafeteria signs, this time permanently.

The battles lines had been drawn. In the eyes of the Local Rights Committee, segregation in Fort Worth was under attack from within and beyond, and the international union had clearly positioned itself in the AD Committee’s corner. Some of the union’s
white members joined the local White Citizens Council.\(^{40}\) The dissident caucus began to search for allies of their own, and they soon found a powerful one: District Director A.J. Pittman.\(^{41}\) After losing the cafeteria battle, Local Rights advocates attempted to seize control of Local 54 and sought to build alliances with like-minded workers throughout the District. In early 1953, they nominated C.H. “Moon” Mullins as a candidate for the local’s presidency along with a slate of candidates for the lesser offices. Mullins and company campaigned on an explicitly white supremacist platform.\(^{42}\) District Director Pittman publicly remained impartial but secretly met with the caucus and provided them with literature for the campaign.\(^{43}\)

At the same time, Local Rights leaders reached out to rank and file members of Local 54. Although roughly half of the union’s members were white, a significant portion of these backed the slate headed by leaders of the old multiracial “fragile alliance.” The approximately 35-40% of the members who were African American could be counted on to vote against Local Rights, and they were well organized by members of the AD Committee. That left only one possible target: the ethnic Mexican workers who constituted between 10 and 15% of the membership (10-20% of each racial group were women). Ethnic Mexicans had traditionally occupied a racial gray area in the Armour plant. On the shop floor, one worker later recalled, they had freely used both sides of the

\(^{40}\) “Minutes, Fifth Constitutional Convention, District Council No. 8,” United Packinghouse, Food, and Allied Workers, District No. 5 Records, TLA-UTA [hereinafter: UPWA District 5 Papers], AR51-68-21, 34-44.


\(^{43}\) Frank Wallace interview, UPWAOHP, tape 76, side 2, 00:30; Eddie Humphrey interview, UPWAOHP, tape 80, side 1, 00:30.
cafeteria and had drunk water “wherever they got thirsty,” using both white and “colored” fountains.\textsuperscript{44}

White Local Rights advocates hoped to capitalize on ethnic Mexicans’ racial ambiguity by recruiting them into a coalition against black civil rights. To this end, white workers periodically visited the homes of ethnic Mexican union members in the evening after work. The morning after such visits, the recipients of such visits often sought advice from Mary Salinas, a beef cutter and the only ethnic Mexican member of the local union’s grievance committee. The Mexican workers were linked to Salinas by membership in the ethnic group, by attendance at the same Catholic Church, and by the experiences of working side-by-side in the factory. They trusted Salinas and followed her lead, repeatedly electing her to the grievance committee to represent their best interests. In that capacity, Salinas had long collaborated in the “fragile alliance” that led the local, and she eventually became involved in the local AD Committee. The cafeteria dispute of late 1952 was simple in her eyes: “I felt that if we could work together, we could eat together at the same table,” she later recalled. Salinas was a committed civil rights unionist, and she advised her members to vote against Mullins during the Local Rights insurrection in early 1953. The union’s ethnic Mexican members followed her lead, ignoring the white supremacists’ entreaties and instead allying themselves with the AD Committee.\textsuperscript{45} The Local Rights group’s strategy thus backfired, sending voters to consult their rivals instead of bringing them into the white supremacist column.

\textsuperscript{44} Mary Salinas interview, \textit{UPWAOHP}, Tape 87, side 1, 03:05.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Ibid}, Tape 87, side 1, 03:05; quotation on Tape 86, side 1, 21:20. Of course, one cannot assume that racial groups have voted as blocs with complete solidarity among their members, and the degree that they
Meanwhile Salinas and the AD Committee redoubled their efforts to extend their control over the local. Their organizing strategy inside the plant “was a slow kind of thing,” she later recalled. They met with individual workers and convinced them to dine as an integrated group or to use the locker rooms previously reserved for members of the opposite race.46 Mullins continued his soapbox speeches, but they proved no match for the AD Committee’s individualized approach. His campaign went down to stinging defeat. Dave Nelson, a white member of AD Committee, was elected president of the local union, while Frank Wallace became vice-president. Ethnic Mexican, African American, and many white members threw their support behind the slate of AD Committee candidates, allowing them to cruise to victory.47

Thwarted in the Fort Worth cafeteria dispute and Local 54 elections and encouraged clandestinely by Pittman, the Local Rights Committee began looking for allies elsewhere in District 8. “Local rights” became the rallying cry for a growing regional movement in which virulent anticommunism replaced overt white supremacy, even as the targets remained the same. White dissidents throughout the district filed a series of complaints charging Communist infiltration of the UPWA at both local and national levels. When an outside investigation led by well-known anticommunist leaders of other CIO unions again found no evidence of Communism within the union, the Local Rights activists filed decertification petitions requesting new recognition elections that did so at all on any given occasion represents a feat of conscious organizing rather than a haphazard mobilization of pre-existing collective identities.

47 Salinas interview, tape 87, side 1, 03:05. Salinas refers to the white supremacist group as “Mr. Pittman and them,” a phrase which highlights her belief that the district director supported Moon Mullins and the Local Rights Committee.
would transform them into Local Industrial Unions (LIUs) affiliated directly with the CIO.48

The international union sent George Thomas to fight the fire in their ranks, focusing on the sugar refining locals of Southern Louisiana. Despite his charisma and organizing skills, the results of the decertification elections largely split along racial lines: the higher percentage of black workers, the greater the chance that local would remain in UPWA. Thomas approached the situation strategically in order to retain the highest possible number of members: most of the larger biracial locals remained within the union, while most of the smaller predominately white locals disaffiliated. While racism certainly played a role in the outcome of the elections, campaign rhetoric primarily emphasized the ongoing alleged role of Communists in UPWA.

For his part, Pittman, whose job description called for fighting the LIU movement, actually helped fuel the anticommunist flames by incessantly denouncing the international leadership. In Sugarland, Texas, just west of the Louisiana sugar region, he encouraged 800 to 900 workers to decertify UPWA.49 By the end of 1953, four other sugar locals joined the Sugarland workers by forming their own LIUs. Still,

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48 Halpern, “Interracial Unionism in the Southwest,” 175. See also Adedeji, “Crossing the Colorline,” 77-117. After Mullins and his slate went down to defeat in 1953, Local Rights Committee members continued to leaflet the plant, this time handing out forms allowing individual unionists to withdraw membership from Local 54. Significantly, Armour’s law firm in Fort Worth, Hutcheson and Hutcheson, mimeographed and circulated the forms, suggesting that management played a hidden role in exacerbating racial tensions within the union. Adedeji, “Crossing the Colorline,” 72.

49 Frank Wallace interview, UPWAOH, tape 77, side 1, 03:40. Pittman’s opposition to the international leadership dated back to at least 1948 (See note #26 above). He continued to charge Helstein and other officers with Communist affiliation despite the negative findings of the CIO commission. “But that [anti-Communism] wasn’t his real thing,” Wallace adds. “His real thing was racial.”

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decertification attempts at two other large locals in 1953 failed when members followed Thomas’ exhortations and voted to remain affiliated with UPWA.\textsuperscript{50}

Ironically, the numerous decertification fights served to strengthen the hand of the AD Committee in District 8, rather than weaken them as the Local Rights Committee had hoped. The results of LIU battles shifted the composition of the district’s membership and engendered a new political logic in terms of race relations. When the smaller locals with mostly white memberships had disaffiliated, the most virulent pockets of white supremacy removed themselves from the district and could no longer obstruct the development of civil rights unionism. Meanwhile, African American workers and their allies had defeated the Local Rights advocates in the largest sugar locals, leaving civil rights unionists in each union with a newly organized majority capable of wresting control of local leadership positions.\textsuperscript{51} “As far as the race relations were concerned, it was better,” recalled Frank Wallace, a member, shop steward, and AD Committee leader in Local 54 in Fort Worth. The opponents of civil rights unionism were “a bunch of racist people from the very beginning until they got out.”\textsuperscript{52}

The decertification elections had another unintended consequence from the perspective of Local Rights proponents: the struggles brought Thomas to dozens of locals

\textsuperscript{50} These were Local 1095 in New Orleans with approximately 250 members and sugar Local 1101 in rural Louisiana near Arabi with some 800-850 workers.
\textsuperscript{52} Frank Wallace interview, \textit{UPWAOHP}, tape 77, side 1, 03:40.
throughout the Southwest, elevating him to a new level as a regionally renowned civil rights unionist. Wallace later remembered, “...He was a real fighter as far as the people were concerned, a real fighter, and a real strong guy with a photostatic mind. He did a hell of a job for the people that he represented, and the people respected him for that.”

Eddie Humphrey, another Local 54 leader, agreed: “When he [Thomas] became a field rep, then he got that necessary exposure [and] the people said, ‘Look, we want you for our district director.’ He did a hell of a job down there in Louisiana with the sugar workers. He did a magnificent job…”

Both civil rights unionism and George Thomas’ career were on the rise when Pittman called the district convention to order in April 1954 in Fort Worth. The District Director surely feared that AD Committee members and activists throughout the region might nominate Thomas for his job during the international convention planned for the following month.

So in a last ditch effort to stave off the challenge, Pittman again raised the banner of anticommunism as a thinly-veiled defense of white supremacy. He stood in support of Resolution No. 6—a declaration that aimed to insert a new anti-Communist provision into the District’s constitution. The ploy gained little traction. Most delegates expressed confusion during the floor debate on the resolution, while a few saw through Pittman’s tactics. For example, Bill Ferrell from Oklahoma said, “I am opposed to Communists. I don’t know the definition of one but I know they don’t believe in God and that is enough for me. They shoot the kind of people that read the bible. They are dictators and I don’t

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53 Frank Wallace interview, *UPWAOHP*, tape 76, side 2, 13:00.
54 Eddie Humphrey interview, *UPWAOHP*, tape 80, side 1, 04:45.
believe in dictators.” Similarly, Jules Rhodes from southern Louisiana added that he had been to forty-eight states and eight countries and had not “ever run into a Communist.” But he challenged delegates to look beyond the Communist question to its racial undertone: “I can’t go along with this resolution,” he said. “Let’s get to the point behind it.” Frank Wallace similarly connected the dots. “It wasn’t the question of a big Communist scare,” he remembered. “It was the question of race relations that he wasn’t about to become involved in. It seemed that we [the AD Committee] were about to acquire power, and that was something that he just didn’t want. And the most appropriate thing for him to use at the time was the Communist issue.” Mary Salinas remembers being asked which side she was on. “‘I’m on the workers’ side,’” she responded. The roll call vote proved much more decisive than the long, back and forth debate preceding it: the convention ultimately rejected the measure by a better than 2-to-1 margin, 33 to 15. Pittman, who had spoken passionately in favor of the resolution, proceeded with ritually thanking the Resolution Committee and completing the business of the convention, but those present already knew that there would be no more business as usual within the union.

The Fort Worth debate and failed resolution ended two years of tense, tumultuous internal union politics. In addition to the fierce electoral and certification campaigns, the

55 “Minutes, Second Constitutional Convention, District Council No. 8,” 39.
56 ibid., 38.
57 Frank Wallace interview, UPWAOH, tape 76, side 2, 00:30.
58 Mary Salinas interview, UPWAOH, tape 86, side 2, 17:20.
59 The vote total was 33 against, 15 for. After speaking to the resolution’s impact on the future direction of the union, Pittman said, “They may remove me [for this] and I want you to know there is going to be no hard feelings from me. I am not crying on your shoulder and I don’t want you crying on mine.” “Minutes, Second Constitutional Convention, District Council No. 8,” 4-6, 12-14, 42, 44.
sundry meetings at the Fort Worth union hall often featured pitched arguments between
the two camps that at times threatened to become violent conflicts. Frank Wallace later
remembered, “Racism was there like it had never been before…It was fortunate nobody
got killed!” 60 Both sides were likely armed to the teeth; Eddie Humphrey, a veteran of
World War II, similarly recalled a meeting in which some “2,000 people [were] down
there with weapons.” Both the AD and Local Rights Committees stood guard: “I got my
pistol in my pocket. Everybody was ready to go to war,” Humphrey added. “…If
somebody had said the wrong thing, there would have been a lot of hurt people.” 61

One month after the Fort Worth regional conference, the District 8 caucus at
UPWA’s international convention in Sioux City, Iowa, took the floor and reported that it
had elected Thomas to replace Pittman. The change signified not only frustration with
the white leader but also hope that Thomas, a proven organizer, would revitalize the
fledgling district through a sincere commitment to civil rights unionism. In particular,
black delegates and their allies saw in Thomas a desire to combine the fight against
racism with the struggle for unionization in the solidly anti-union and white supremacist
South. 62 Although most if not all of African-Americans voted for him, it was Thomas’
widespread support among whites that cemented his victory. In anticipation of the
convention, civil rights unionists had launched an education campaign, holding a series of
departmental-level meetings throughout the region. Such efforts paid off: the caucus in

60 Frank Wallace interview, UPWAOHP, tape 76, side 2, 19:55.
61 Eddie Humphrey interview, UPWAOHP, tape 80, side 1, 11:55.
Sioux City, comprised by a majority of white delegates, voted for Thomas. “It was done basically by the whites…” Wallace recalled.63

The election gave the Fort Worth beef lugger and committed civil rights unionist jurisdiction over all UPWA locals in the Southwest. The white workers who supported Thomas’ election saw immediate dividends: by the next District convention in late March 1955, Thomas reported victory in two additional elections: at the 900-member Local #1124 in Reserve, Louisiana, and the 500-member Local #1167 in Gramercy, Louisiana.64 At the same time, at least three additional locals disaffiliated in response to Pittman’s ouster. Louisiana sugar locals #1420 and #1422 left the UPWA, as did Local #59, the lily-white group of Stockyard handlers in Fort Worth who had been Pittman’s most committed supporters. Local Rights advocates clearly registered their protest, but in the process they helped solidify the AD Committee’s control of the District. At the local level, Mary Salinas successfully ran for and became the president of Local 54 in January, 1955, becoming the union’s first ethnic Mexican and woman in that post.

White supremacist anticommunism thus failed to take hold in UPWA District 8 in the early 1950s. The union bucked the trend of the times thanks to a massive civil rights unionist movement—backed by the international union but led by home grown activists such as Thomas, Wallace, Salinas, and Humphrey. The Cold War’s triumph over labor and civil rights was not inevitable in Texas, nor across America. Rather, the AD Committee in UPWA’s Southwestern region shows that ordinary working people were

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63 *ibid*, 76-2, 13:00. In a last ditch effort to remain in power Pittman sponsored an anticommunist resolution at the international convention, but like the district-level measure, it was soundly defeated.  
64 Local 1124 counted approximately 900 members; Local 1167 had 500.
capable of not simply maintaining, but also extending civil rights unionism even in the most oppressive times and places.

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After capturing the highest posts in the District and defeating their enemies at the local level, the longtime members of the AD Committee now turned to governing their union. In the late 1950s they extended the struggle for black civil rights into every facet of their union’s operations as well as into the communities in which they lived. They developed a broad civil rights agenda, began practicing integration in everyday life, joined and contributed financially to non-union (or community-based) civil rights campaigns, and fanned out across Texas and the region to spread their brand of civil rights unionism despite seemingly overwhelming obstacles.

On May 17, 1954, ten days after George Thomas’ ascent to the top post in District 8, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the landmark Brown v. Board decision that banned segregation in public schools. AD Committee members saw this as an opportunity to extend their fight beyond the internal workings of the union and into the communities in which they lived. They began by holding “a joint Anti-Discrimination and Political Action Conference” along with UPWA’s southeastern District 9. The conference allowed civil rights unionists to chart a course for the coming years and fired a shot across the bow of Jim Crow. “More than 15,000 workers from 13 Southern states will be represented at the conference which will mark the opening of the union’s all-out campaign to implement the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision,” the press release announcing the meeting reads. “The Eisenhower Administration is going to see to it that
everybody gets wage cuts—unless we join and see to it that everybody gets equal rights,” the two Directors added. UPWA members from across the South attended the conference in Atlanta in March 1955, including fifty-three delegates from faraway District 8. They passed a series of resolutions calling for a broad civil rights campaign beyond the halls of the union. The titles of the resolutions offers a glimpse of the unionists’ agenda for the future: “To End Voting Restrictions,” “Joint CIO Anti-Discrimination Conference for the South,” “Economic Crusade in the South,” and “Opposing Segregation in Public Transportation.”

This last measure in particular underscores the delegates’ concern for civil rights issues located beyond the confines of UPWA’s unionized worksites. Meeting nearly nine months before Rosa Parks ignited the Montgomery Bus Boycott in December 1955, the delegates suggested that the new legal precedent established by Brown should be applied to public transportation as well. They further resolved that the union “make immediate plans to move against discrimination and segregation in every place where it is yet found.”

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65 George Thomas, “Call to the First Joint Anti-Discrimination Conference of Districts 8 & 9,” UPWA District 5 Papers, AR51-78-19; Les Orear, “Upwa Calls 13-State Confab to End Segregation in the South,” UPWA District 5 Papers, AR51-78-19. Attempting to schedule an integrated conference in the South proved extremely difficult. UPWA staff contacted locations in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee before finding a hotel in Atlanta that agreed to accommodate the meeting. But local officials used local vagrancy ordinances and even sought Congressional intervention to stop the meeting from taking place. The conference was postponed but eventually took place at Atlanta University, one of the city’s black colleges. Adedeji, “Crossing the Colorline,” 149. Various documents relating to scheduling of Anti-Discrimination Conference, 1954-1955, United Packinghouse, Food, and Allied Workers, Records 1937-1982, Wisconsin Historical Society [hereinafter UPWA Papers-WHS], Mss 118 Box 354 Folder 17.

66 Aldon Morris begins his history of the Origins of the Civil Rights Movement with a discussion of a successful boycott of public transit lines in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Robin Kelley examines racial conflicts on Birmingham’s segregated bus system and arrives at the conclusion that Jim Crow buses represented a particularly objectionable form of humiliation for African-Americans, making public transit a logical site for early civil rights struggles. Needless to say, the history of UPWA supports Kelley’s
The resolutions first passed in Atlanta became the official civil rights platform of UPWA District 8, and delegates at future conventions annually renewed their commitment to the acts. But the UPWA’s assault on white supremacy also took shape in a series of local struggles between union meetings. Throughout the late 1950s, the union demanded integrated hotel accommodations for its conventions and other meetings and sponsored a variety of interracial social events.

Just as Freeman Everett and the TFC had worked to desegregate the annual meetings of the TSFL, UPWA leaders worked to integrate both their own gatherings and those of its parent Texas State CIO Council. Such efforts may appear mundane to present-day readers, but they consistently captured the attention of contemporary activists. In May 1956, for example, members of the District 8 Executive Board in Dallas attempted to arrange an integrated meeting in their city, but they struggled to do so. One hotel eventually agreed to house all board members, black and white, but management still prohibited them from using the hotel restaurant, offering a private dining room instead. Steve Mauser, a white UPWA organizer and longtime AD Committee member originally from Denver but assigned to Fort Worth, called this “the first break through by any group [in Dallas].”

Still the District leadership rejected these terms. It wasn’t until

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November 1961—over five years later—that the Executive Board finally held its first fully integrated board meeting in Dallas, at the Sheraton Hotel.⁶⁹

In late 1957, District organizers led by Mauser reached an agreement with the Hilton to hold the District’s 1958 convention in San Antonio, but the hotel chain backed out when it discovered that the sessions would be racially integrated. Forced at the last moment to move its convention to Albuquerque, New Mexico, the District ended up spending an extra $7,000 on hotel and travel costs.⁷⁰ UPWA leaders filed suit against the San Antonio Hilton, and the hotel eventually paid the union $4,000 to settle outside of court. In April 1959, director Thomas proudly reported that the hotel had been forced to pay for discrimination.⁷¹

District 8 struggled to find an integrated convention site in Texas into the 1960s—even after a wave of student sit-ins forced the desegregation of department stores lunch counters across the South, including all of the major cities in Texas (see chapter 3). In October 1960, UPWA organizer Frank Wallace contacted the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio to request accommodation for the 1961 convention. He recorded what transpired in his staff report:

⁶⁹ “Break Color Line at Dallas Hotel,” Packinghouse Worker, 21:11 (December) 1961, 9. They also sought a convention site in Dallas for the District’s 1960 convention, but they were unable to do so and ended up holding it in Wichita, Kansas, instead.
⁷¹ “Minutes, Seventh Constitutional Convention, District Council No. 5,” April 3-5, 1959. UPWA District 5 Papers, AR51-141-12, 2; District 5 Council, “Executive Board Meeting Minutes,” September 6-7, 1958. UPWA District 5 Papers, AR51-126-5, 2.
The President of Local 722 and I made a trip to San Antonio, Texas to see if we could get accommodations for the District Convention to be held in March of 1961. We were shown the beautiful meeting rooms and were told that the dates were agreeable, then we were asked how many delegates would be Negro. I explained to the resident manager as best I could (considering the state I was in [Wallace is African-American]) that we had no way of knowing. Then what I expected after such a question—the resident manager said that they could not house Negro delegates, but they could eat in a private dining room, ride the elevators as long as they had their badges on, and he was sure they could stay at the YMCA. After some discussion, we left stating to him that for this very same reason, we had had no convention in Texas because it was not our policy to treat one group or race of our people any different from the other and he would hear from Director Thomas. “Would love to have the convention, but”—so says resident manager Corrin of the Gunter Hotel, San Antonio, Texas, U.S.A. 72

While hotels became a favorite target for UPWA organizers, union-sponsored social events allowed ordinary UPWA members to bring integration to the community through a range of daily interactions outside the workplace that transcended racial lines. For example, in 1954 Armour Local 54 in Fort Worth sponsored an integrated baseball team composed of rank and file members. They initially experienced difficulty finding teams with which to compete, but they later joined the North Texas Baseball League and won their division championship. The following year Local 316 in Dallas followed suit and sponsored the local’s first in a series of integrated baseball teams. 73 Around the same time the District 8 Council sponsored a series of annual picnics that defied local

72 Frank J. Wallace, “Field Staff Weekly Report,” October 30, 1960. UPWA District 5 Papers, AR51-165-10, 2. Note that a local union president accompanied Wallace to San Antonio in order to accomplish this task. This suggests that UPWA staffers were not the only active civil rights unionists in the District—they merely authored the written records. Wallace may have also used the trip as a tactic of experiential political education, allowing the local president to witness the hotel manager’s reluctance first hand.

73 “Minutes, Third Constitutional Convention, District Council No. 8,” 3, 30; “Minutes, Fourth Constitutional Convention, District Council No. 8,” 6, 28, 43; District 8 Council, “Executive Board Meeting Minutes,” January 18-19, 1958, 2.
The UPWA Women’s Committees hosted integrated Christmas parties at both Local 1101 in Louisiana and Local 54 in Fort Worth. The latter invited others in the community to attend, and as many as 500 came to the 1954 soiree in which children of all races exchanged gifts. The Christmas parties likely took place at the union halls, but the presence of members of the general public expanded their significance beyond the union and into the local community.

In addition to challenging Jim Crow hotels and experimenting in social integration, AD Committee activists within UPWA District 8 joined and supported a variety of civil rights movement organizations outside the union. Civil rights unionists in Armour Local 54 in Fort Worth often interacted with area chapters of the NAACP, Urban League, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). UPWA members often brought NAACP membership cards to the plant in order to recruit new members. Frank Wallace first joined the association in 1948, and he was still a member at the time of his oral history interview in 1986. In the decades between Wallace participated in a number of sit-ins and pickets “in front of places that we tried to get blacks hired and restaurants where we tried to get them to admit us to eat.”

Eddie Humphrey remembers that the NAACP in Fort Worth was very active in the 1950s, and he urged everyone he

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74 “Minutes, Third Constitutional Convention, District Council No. 8,” 31.
75 “Minutes, Fourth Constitutional Convention, District Council No. 8,” 6, 28, 43.
76 “Minutes, Fifth Constitutional Convention, District Council No. 8,” 3, 49.
77 “Minutes, Third Constitutional Convention, District Council No. 8,” 2, 29-30; “Minutes, Sixth Constitutional Convention, District Council No. 8,” March 7-9, 1958. UPWA District 5 Papers, AR51-126-2, 32.
78 Frank Wallace interview, **UPWAHP**, tape 77, side 2, 02:40 - 06:05. Despite these acts, Wallace remained critical of both the union’s and his individual participation: “I don’t think we did the job that we could have done or should have done,” he says. “…I blame myself and say that I didn’t push hard enough.”
knew to join the association. A number of packinghouse workers became members of the NAACP, including a number of white workers, some of whom did so secretly because “they just didn’t want to be associated with it because, excuse the expression, ‘this was a nigger organization.’” Although this latter group joined the association and contributed to it financially, they refused to let the ‘nigger organization’ publicize their names. In 1959, UPWA Executive Board member Ida Sutton worked with a local Texas NAACP chapter to pressure plant foremen to hire black workers.\(^{79}\) Humphrey later convinced the majority white Tarrant County Central Labor Council to become a lifetime member of the NAACP. Humphrey also recalled that the local Urban League encouraged residential desegregation and helped “black people like myself moving into a community where we could have decent homes...”\(^{80}\) Meanwhile, Local 54 leader Mary Salinas and organizer Frank Wallace attended a dynamic meeting of the Dallas SCLC in February 1958.\(^{81}\)

In addition to local activism, UPWA members in Texas participated in several national campaigns spearheaded by NAACP and the SCLC. Some participated in the NAACP’s 1956 Civil Rights Assembly, the Prayer Pilgrimage on Washington, D.C., in 1957, and SCLC’s national “Crusade for Citizenship” in 1958. Although evidence of such participation remains scant, it remains clear that members of District 8 joined the national union’s efforts. UPWA endorsed the Civil Rights Assembly of 1956 as a co-

\(^{79}\) District 5 Council, “Executive Board Meeting Minutes,” April 1-2, 1959, 4.
\(^{80}\) Eddie Humphrey interview, \textit{UPWAOPH}, tape 79, side 2, 00:30.
A year later UPWA sent some four hundred delegates from around the country to the National Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, which celebrated the three year anniversary of Brown on May 17, 1957, with a march on the Lincoln Memorial. UPWA International Vice President Lasley believed that the Pilgrimage, originally planned as a demonstration against President Eisenhower, had been “watered down,” but the international union still encouraged local unions to participate. Several months later, SCLC’s Crusade for Citizenship aimed to publicize the denial of voting rights to African-Americans through simultaneous demonstrations in twenty-two Southern cities on February 12, 1958. District Director George Thomas “alerted their staff representatives to contact UPWA locals in these cities and encourage their cooperation in mobilizing…” Organizer Frank Wallace heeded Thomas’ call and persuaded the leaders of one local to get involved. “Our Local #406 did a good job by contacting other unions in the Houston area and civil groups,” he reported. Harlem Rev. Adam Clayton Powell gave the keynote address at the Houston demonstration, speaking before a crowd of “some 2,000 people.”

UPWA members also raised money for national civil rights struggles. In 1957 and again in 1961, the international union called on the districts to contribute to a new

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83 “Actions Taken by the International Executive Board,” April 17-18, 1957, UPWA Papers-WHS, Mss 118 Box 138 Folder 9, p12; Lasley, “Program Activities Report to the 11th Constitutional Convention, UPWA, AFL-CIO,” 15-16. Thomas’ files contained correspondence related to the Prayer Pilgrimage, but it remains unclear whether or not locals from District 8 sent representatives to the demonstration.
84 Lasley, “Program Activities Report to the 11th Constitutional Convention,” 15; Frank J. Wallace, “Field Staff Weekly Report: Program Department Excerpts,” February 16, 1958, UPWA Papers-WHS, Mss 118 Box 385 Folder 4. Wallace also monitored the Dallas demonstration, in which only 100 people participated, but he makes no reference to the participation (or non-participation) of UPWA locals in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.
“Fund for Democracy in the South.” In both campaigns District 8 emerged as a leader among UPWA affiliates in terms of meeting and exceeding its fundraising quotas. Lasley pledged the union’s support for the civil rights movement at one of the SCLC’s founding meetings at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta in January, 1957. District 8 members and local leaders proved responsive to the call, finishing second out of all districts in contributions per member and exceeding their designated quota by over 70%. The southwestern district raised over $2,000 among a membership of only 5,778. In terms of contributions per member, District 8 exceeded all regions except Chicago District 1 and dwarfed that of the union’s largest district, #3, centered in Des Moines, Iowa. Fundraising in the southwest also outpaced efforts in the southeast: the over 3,000 members of District 9 contributed only $25. The international total reached $22,581.89, topping the campaign’s overall goal of $20,000.85

85 Russell Lasley, “Memo to All District Directors: Schedule of Contributions from Districts and Locals to the Fund for Democracy in the South,” October, 1957. UPWA Papers-WHS, Mss 118 Box 379 Folder 2; “District Quotas for Upwa Fund for the South,” n.d. (1957). UPWA Papers-WHS, Mss 118 Box 379 Folder 1. Membership statistics and UPWA’s original fundraising quotas were based on the average membership of local and district affiliates for the year 1956. Using these data, there were 96,992 total members in the international union, of which about 6% (5,778) were in District 8. The Southwestern district’s corresponding quota stood at $1,156 (out of $20,000 total), but the district responded to the call by pledging a total of $2000 instead (173% of its quota). By the end of the five-month campaign in October 1957, District 8 raised $2000.70. District 8 contributed about thirty-five cents per member (the quota called for twenty cents). The UPWA total reached $22,640.29 by the time of the union’s 1958 national convention. See Russell Lasley, “Program Activities Report to the 11th Constitutional Convention,” 14.

Although most contributions came from local unions voting to contribute money directly from their treasuries, some funds likely hailed from individual donations as well. But even if no rank and file members contributed directly, the fact that twenty-five different sets of democratically elected local officers voted to take money from their treasuries and hand it over to the Fund clearly indicates widespread member support for civil rights unionism. Two thousand dollars was no small sum for working people in 1957, and the local union leaders and activists who voted to send their parts of it to the Fund doubtlessly considered the other purposes to which their monies could have been applied. Their repeated decision to spend it on a grandiosely titled “Fund for Democracy in the South” rather than local need reveals the depth of their belief in the interconnected nature of unionization and the antiracist struggle as articulated by Lasley.
In October 1957, union officers presented Martin Luther King with an $11,000 check during a large national UPWA conference. After King’s keynote address to the delegates, Vice President Lasley presented the reverend with what he called “a down payment bringing freedom to the South,” made out to the newly renamed Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). King thanked the delegates profusely:

“Words really are inadequate for me to express my appreciation to you,” he said, “but in the best way that I possibly can, I want you to know that this will go a long, long way…” UPWA’s “sizable contribution,” King concluded, “will begin our efforts to make justice and freedom a reality in the south by gaining the ballot.”

In 1961 UPWA international officers revived the Fund for Democracy, and once again the strength of civil rights unionism in the District 8 propelled it to surpass UPWA’s other regions in fundraising. It did so despite what one UPWA staffer called a “heavy” atmosphere that prompted widespread reluctance among whites.

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“Heavy” may have been an understatement. Jim Crow still reigned supreme, and the Cold War had put most other labor and civil rights organizations in Texas on the

86 “Proceedings, Fourth Biennial Wage and Contract Conference,” September 30 - October 4, 1957. UPWA Papers-WHS, Mss 118 Box 526, 231-234. Note that King emphasized voting rights in anticipation of the Crusade for Citizenship, in which UPWA participated in 1958. UPWA later donated $5,000 from the Fund to the NAACP, and the Executive Board recommended a contribution to Myles Horton’s Highlander Folk School (it appears that the Board’s proposal was not implemented.). Additional contributions were made to CORE, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and the Anti-Defamation League. “Actions Taken at International Executive Board Meeting,” September 27-28, 1957. UPWA Papers-WHS, Mss 118 Box 138 Folder 8, 2-3; Lasley, “Program Activities Report to the 11th Constitutional Convention,” op cit, 14; “Address by Russell R. Lasley on the UPWA Fund for Democracy Drive,” n.d. (1961), UPWA District 5 Papers, AR51 Box 168 Folder 5, 2.

87 ibid; UPWA Publications Department, “Upwa Staff Letter,” June 23, 1961. UPWA Papers-WHS, Mss 118 Box 396 Folder 18, 1-2. The staff letter also suggests that organizers raised funds from a combination of local union contributions and individual member donations, collected by shop stewards.
defensive. In fact, as UPWA organizers fanned out in the late 1950s to spread the gospel of civil rights unionism across the state, they continued to encounter a wide range of obstacles. White workers frequently opposed their efforts, as did white reporters, police officers, and employers. As was often true throughout in the South, civil rights activists often butted heads with white supremacists who mobilized and creatively blended a series of familiar tropes aimed to discredit the former group’s organizing. Opponents of civil rights claimed innate racial superiority, which in turn allowed them to charge black activists with being duped by Communists or outside agitators and above all shored up the most important of Jim Crow taboos: the prohibition against inter-racial sex. Members of the AD Committee confronted each of these tropes from all of the aforementioned antagonists. Each episode reveals both the depth of “massive resistance” in Jim Crow Texas and the civil rights activists’ dedication to developing an alternate movement culture.

White racism, sexism, and fears of “miscegenation” represented key factors in the life of Mary Salinas, the ethnic Mexican woman who became president of Local 54 in 1955. Born in 1922 in Rosebud, Texas, she lived in nearby Waco until 1931. Her father was active in the painters’ union, a fact that along with his Mexican ethnicity drew the ire of local members of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klansmen attacked the senior Salinas, tied him to a tree, and held a straight razor to his neck before badly slashing his arms. The family fled at night and took refuge in Dallas. Mary Salinas got a job at Armour in Fort Worth in 1942, where she helped organize the union and helped it through the nationwide strike of 1948. She served as a shop steward and member of the grievance and AD
committees and chaired the Women’s Activities Committee by 1954. She spearheaded the integrated Christmas party late that year and became local president in January, 1955.88

For Salinas, the union was as much about improving the lives of women as it was about winning better wages or fighting racial discrimination. For example, women frequently asked for maternity leave during contract negotiations, but the union under the former director Pittman bargained away these demands in exchange for better wages and benefits for the men. Women who miscarried consequently faced discipline for missing work, as did Salinas when she got a hysterectomy. Throughout the factory, jobs that were reserved for women received compensation far below that of male-designated positions, and women frequently worked on low piece rates. Women initially received more vacation time than did men, and men and women appeared on separate seniority lists. Some all-female departments remained all-white.89 The struggle to replace Pittman with Thomas also included corrective action in each of these areas. The next contract added maternity leave and made progress toward reducing the wage differential between men and women. Gladys Humphrey, the wife of shop steward and AD activist Eddie Humphrey, got a job in the all-white sliced bacon department, where she withstood a wildcat walk out and ongoing harassment from white women workers. Salinas organized


89 Mary Salinas interview, *UPWAOHP*, Tape 85, side 2, 00:30, 22:45; Tape 86, side 1, 00:30, 06:35, 09:25, 10:30.
and served as chair of the local union’s women’s committee, a mixed-race group that oversaw each of these transitions.90 “We had coffee and we would talk and exchange ideas about what could be done in the plant or what they would like to see put in the next contract.”91

When Salinas ran for local union president in 1955, she enjoyed the support of countless men in the plant in addition to women. Those that opposed her did so primarily because of her support for black civil rights and her participation in the AD Committee. One flyer circulated by members of the Local Rights Committee branded her a “Negro lover,” in her case a gendered charge intended to imply that she did actually have sex with black men. Salinas refuted these claims, not because she was anti-black but because she knew they were being used to discredit her union and civil rights activism. Yet with the support of black, Mexican, and many white workers, she easily won the election and then served intermittently as a local officer and lost time (temporary) staffer until the main Armour plant closed in 1962.92

Her position as local president and a recognized activist allowed Salinas to extend the fight for women’s issues beyond Fort Worth to the entire UPWA. In September 1955, she attended the district union’s first regional women’s conference, hosted by one of the sugar locals in Gramercy, Louisiana. There she joined district director Thomas, Frank Wallace, and other staff members in outlining the persistent problems facing women on the shop floor, including at Armour in Fort Worth. There they still lacked a

90 Ibid. Tape 86, side 1, 06:35, 10:30; Tape 87, side 1, 09:50, 13:20.
91 Ibid, Tape 86, side 1, 13:05.
92 Ibid, Tape 86, side 1, 21:20; Tape 87, side 1, 00:30, 03:05, 18:55
dressing room and faced discrimination in hiring and the bulk of the effects from automation. Women on the night shift did not have access to “nursing facilities,” and sixty women who worked in an ancillary plant had no cafeteria. Yet the shift to a new civil rights unionist leadership meant that these issues were finally being addressed head-on, rather than traded away for contractual gains that primary benefitted male workers. Salinas traveled to Chicago to meet with her counterparts in local women’s committees there, working with renowned civil rights activist Addie Wyatt to bring their recommendations to fruition throughout the entire international union. “We were sort of a watch dog over the district offices to push the programs, and if they didn’t we would gripe about it, even if we had to wait until the next convention,” she later recalled.

Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, Salinas took time off of work to travel as a consultant, speaker, and women’s organizer for UPWA locals across the country. She and another ethnic Mexican woman served as ambassadors for the international union’s Women’s Activities and AD Committees. Thanks to their efforts, local unions elected women officers and hired women organizers at a level that far exceeded the efforts of other contemporary unions.

Gender and sexuality also shaped the experiences of male packinghouse workers. While white, black, and ethnic Mexican women performed ostensibly delicate tasks, white men supervised as black and ethnic Mexican men did heavy labor in the least

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94 Mary Salinas interview, UPWAOHP, Tape 87, side 1, 21:40; Tape 87, side 2, 00:30, 02:15 (quotation), 03:20.
sanitary and most demanding of positions. Local Rights Committee members claimed that the desegregation of the cafeteria and the shop floor would bring white women into contact with black men, thereby subjecting them to possible rape or at best “miscegenation” that would degrade the purity of the white race.

Just as Mary Salinas was called a “Negro lover” to contain her activism, black men who were activists also faced restrictions on their sexual activity. Sometime around 1954, organizer Frank Wallace, an African American man, began dating a white woman who worked at the plant. When members of the Local Rights Committee learned of this most horrific transgression of Jim Crow etiquette, they began assembling a mob to find, beat, and perhaps lynch Wallace. UPWA staffers uncovered the plot and informed Wallace, and they quickly spirited him away and out of Fort Worth. Fearing increased violence, district director Thomas re-assigned Wallace to Houston, where the staffer continued to organize workers of all races and both sexes and challenged Jim Crow at every turn. His relationship with the white woman in Fort Worth apparently ended with his relocation.

UPWA leaders had long braved tense, racially-charged and at times heavily-armed meetings at the union hall, but the appearance of a probable lynch mob tested even their limits. Still, the union’s campaign of labor and civil rights organizing continued throughout the decade. Weekly field staff reports from 1956 and 1960 offer a rare glimpse of organizers’ day to day experiences and again reveal the familiar racist tropes deployed by white workers, employers, and community members.
Many white rank and file members refused to interact with black UPWA staffers much less join them in civil rights demonstrations. In 1956 white organizer Steve Mauser reported on a decertification fight in southeast Texas: “While working in Sugarland, I found that there great resentment among a few people regarding Field Rep. Wallace coming in (Negro). Before leaving one member of the committee stated she would meet with Wallace, but not to tell her husband, who is very anti-Negro.” Marion Ramon, an ethnic Mexican organizer, recalls a similar incident with the one of the local union’s own officers:

When Steve Mauser and I were in SugarLand [sic], we contacted the financial secretary…we got into her refusal to meet with Representative Wllace [sic] because he was a Negro. At first she and her husband were very bitter, but after we talked to them for quite a while she stated that she would meet with Frank if he came down again for negotiations [sic]. Then the following week she agreed to let Frank have the books [the union’s financial records] at the plant to bring them up to date, but that he could not come to her home. I think it is quite a bit of progress considering she was so very bitter about it at first and I am sure after she meets Frank she will change her mind about him even more so.

Both of these stories indicate the depth of white prejudice toward African-Americans in the Jim Crow South. Here a number of white workers, some of them women, refused to meet with Frank Wallace simply because he was a black man. For the woman in the first account, her reluctance was explicitly gendered: knowing the taboo against contact between black men and white women, she at first refused any contact with Wallace, but she eventually relented, provided Mauser doesn’t tell her “very anti-Negro” husband. In the second story the union financial secretary’s husband was involved from the beginning, but it too demonstrates the gendered nature of racial stereotypes. Both husband and wife initially opposed contact with Wallace, but after a
conversation lasting “quite a while” with both Mauser and Ramon, she agreed to work with the black organizer. Even then she refused to do so at her home in accordance with the Jim Crow provision that protected the supposed sanctuary of white womanhood against defamation by immoral black men. Remarkably, Ramon considered this change in attitude “a bit of progress”—underscoring how bad the normal situation that UPWA organizers encountered must have been.95 One can only imagine the conversations that might have transpired when organizers tried to recruit workers to join civil rights demonstrations inside the plant or in the community.

Despite such attitudes, Frank Wallace successfully unionized a mostly white group of workers at the Rath packing company in Houston in the fall of 1960. Still, white racism presented a formidable obstacle to the campaign from beginning to end. In mid-September company management reluctantly agreed to hold a union recognition election under the supervision of the National Labor Relations Board. Wallace worried about the outcome as the workers prepared to cast their secret ballots. “We still have the problems of the red and race issue[s] that I am trying to clear up,” he wrote. “These two things can hurt us if not handled right…” At Wallace’s request Hazel Hill, a white woman UPWA activist from a nearby local, spoke at a meeting of the mostly white Rath employees and worked to convince them to vote in favor of union representation.96 The company continued to resist unionization by posting intimidating notices on employee

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95 This report of “progress” parallels Mauser’s assertions about negotiations with segregated hotels. Perhaps it should not be surprising that these activists, confronting the long odds that they faced, need to remain optimistic.

96 Frank J. Wallace, “Field Staff Weekly Report,” September 4, 1960. UPWA District 5 Papers, AR51 Box 165 Folder 10, 1. Note that civil rights activists like Wallace were still forced to defend themselves against charges of Communist sympathies into the 1960s.
bulletin boards. UPWA won the election despite such maneuvers, but Wallace reported ongoing “problems on the racial issues” as he worked with local leaders to negotiate their first contract.

When the company refused to pay standard wage rates for the industry, the Rath workers voted unanimously to go on strike. Although the membership had finally united around the campaign, Wallace faced new opposition from the Houston’s law enforcement and media, which remained perplexed that white workers would join blacks on a picket line. More than a dozen law enforcement vehicles “suddenly made a force landing on us, stating that they had gotten a call from someone saying that we had guns and clubs,” Wallace reported. “What seemed strange to them and the newspaper was that I happen to be a Negro field representative of the UPWA, AFL-CIO, and the man in charge of this strike, with an almost all white group [of workers].” Even when UPWA organizers could overcome the prejudices of white workers, the outside world continued to question their carefully constructed interracial solidarity.

As Wallace’s account suggests, the companies themselves presented a formidable obstacle to the advancement of civil rights unionism in District 8. Discussions at one national UPWA anti-discrimination conference listed several of the methods employers

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97 Frank J. Wallace, “Field Staff Weekly Report,” September 18 & 25, 1960. UPWA District 5 Papers, AR51 Box 165 Folder 10. The notice stated “that no employees were to talk about the union while being clocked in.” Wallace summarizes an incident which prompted its posting: “It seems that one of our men had asked a fellow employee to join the union or fight, so instead of doing either one, this fellow turned stool pidgeon [sic] and went crying for protection.”


used to race-bait civil rights unionists and otherwise “destroy union effectiveness.”
Employers divided workers along racial lines, exacerbated conflicts among workers, created disunity by “spreading false rumors among workers” and “creating suspicion.” Companies also strategically applied discriminatory hiring practices in order to undermine militant unionists, especially black workers. Companies also encouraged white workers to “come directly to management with their grievances” in lieu of bringing complaints to black stewards; in so doing the packers mobilized racial prejudices to undermine the union’s internal organization and cohesion.\(^\text{101}\) When all else failed, companies turned to calling the union “red,” at times charging officers with deference to Moscow or alternatively accusing unions of using dues “for the advancement of communist affiliation”—as one Texas employer put it.\(^\text{102}\) Many white workers in District 8 brought racial prejudice to the plant on their own volition, but whenever possible management clearly took advantage of the situation in order to discredit the union.

In light of these myriad obstacles, the considerable accomplishments of civil rights unionists in UPWA’s southwestern district appear even more striking. In addition to challenging the racial and gender mores of the day and actively supporting the civil rights movement, the union also managed to expand its membership. In fact, the blossoming of civil rights activity within UPWA during the late 1950s coincided with the union’s own heyday—a period of unprecedented growth. Civil rights unionists in the district had always linked the fate of their union to their ability to contest Jim Crow, and

\(^\text{101}\) “Discussion Guide on Civil Rights, in Minutes, Fourth National Anti-Discrimination Conference,” June 1-5, 1959. UPWA Papers-WHS, Mss 118 Box 388 Folder 1, 3-4.
\(^\text{102}\) District 5 Council, “Executive Board Meeting Minutes,” 3.
history confirmed the veracity of this connection. District 8’s bread and butter
unionism—its ability to organize and sustain effective locals capable of negotiating
contracts that guaranteed a good wages and working conditions—peaked in the late
1950s. In 1954, the year that George Thomas took office as District Director, UPWA
counted 4,308 members in the Southwest.\textsuperscript{103} In 1955 and 1956, District 8 won sixteen of
nineteen elections to gain union recognition at new plants, bringing a whopping 34%
increase in the membership.\textsuperscript{104} District 8 had its best year yet in 1957, winning fifteen of
twenty-one elections and outpacing the international union’s annual average.\textsuperscript{105}
Membership grew to approximately 6,500.\textsuperscript{106}

The several thousand Packinghouse Workers in Texas represented the radical
fringe, the most extreme example of black, white, and ethnic Mexican workers
continuing to fight for democracy (in all of its meanings) at the very height of the Cold
War. As their counterparts in innumerable labor and civil rights organizations retreated
defensively, they advanced. They seized control of the UPWA and made it part and
parcel of the broader black freedom struggle. They promoted leadership by women of all

\textsuperscript{103} Alice H. White, “Memo to International Executive Board,” June 29, 1955. UPWA Papers-WHS, Mss
118 Box 120 Folder 12. This number is based upon the average per monthly per capita tax paid by District
8 to the international union. It probably represents a low point after several sugar locals disaffiliated to
become LIUs.

\textsuperscript{104} UPWA Organization Department, “Election Report: District 8,” November 1956. UPWA Papers-WHS,
Mss 118 Box 373 Folder 10 covers all elections through November 12, 1956. The membership statistic
used in my calculation of 34% was 5,778, the average per capita payment for 1956 (compared to 4,308, the
average for 1955). Membership was probably higher by the end of that year. “District Quotas for Upwa

\textsuperscript{105} District 8 won 15/21 or 71.4% of its elections while the total figures for the international were 89/133 or
66.9%. District 8 won elections covering 1,368 workers and lost elections covering 247, meaning that the
union gained representation over 84.7% of the total workers involved. The international total, in contrast,
counted 5,389 workers in elections won and 6,443 in elections lost, bringing its percentage to 45.5%. See
“Minutes, Sixth Constitutional Convention, District Council No. 8,” 23.

\textsuperscript{106} 6,500 is a very rough guess, based on the conservative assumption that at least 750 of the 1,368 workers
organized during 1957 actually joined the union.

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races and men of color. In short, they practiced democratic life in ways that few of their contemporaries could imagine.

**The Wide Space Between: Dallas**

If the UPWA represented one end of a continuum, and the opposite end was inhabited by the narrow, scared-straight, nearly lily-white unionism of the mainline Texas State AFL-CIO, the majority of black and brown working people found themselves in the vast space between these two poles. Yet they typically remained liminal. The civil rights unionist movement of Houston was a shadow of its former self, while the great pecan sheller uprising had become a faint memory. Good jobs remained largely unavailable to women and all those with dark skin. Most African American and ethnic Mexican people struggled to survive. They turned to their neighbors for mutual support and continued experimenting in small-scale community organizing. Progress was slow in coming.

A small minority had joined the first industrial unions that arrived in Texas during the Depression and World War II. The arrival of a labor movement had opened the door to a new wave of organizing, new hopes and possibilities for economic security and political transformation. The federal government at least partially endorsed such activities. In Dallas, the NLRB condemned Ford’s campaign of beating and intimidation in 1941. In Houston and elsewhere, the FEPC offered black and brown workers opportunities, albeit temporary, to advance up the occupational ladder. The coming of World War II further emboldened workers across Texas, who seized the transition from
Depression-era mass unemployment to severe labor shortages to demand a share of the benefits from the state’s rising industrial economy.

In Dallas, the wartime mobilization gave rise to a new defense industry that quickly dominated the city’s manufacturing sector. Government contracts subsidized the production of tens of thousands of new airplanes and other ancillary products. The leaders of all the region’s major concerns simply could not afford a work stoppage. So as unions began entering the plants in and around Dallas, the open shop rapidly gave way to comprehensive collective bargaining agreements.

Ten miles west of Dallas in Grand Prairie, for example, North American Aviation sprouted up from the undeveloped plains and quickly swelled to a workforce of nearly 40,000 during the war. The UAW soon moved in. In Fort Worth, over 30,000 workers at the Convair “bomber plant” joined the International Association of Machinists. The two local unions would remain the backbones of organized labor in Dallas and Tarrant Counties, respectively, for the next half-century. Federal defense contracts underwrote the success of both the companies and the unions.¹⁰⁷

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African American and Chicano/a workers shared in the spoils of New Deal and wartime largesse—as well as the labor movement it supported—but they did so unevenly. A closer look at one ethnic Mexican worker’s experience reveals both the radical

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opportunities and the reactionary limitations presented by both the New Deal and multiracial industrial unionism.

Francisco Franco Medrano, better known by his nickname “Pancho,” was born in the North Dallas barrio called Little Mexico in 1920. His parents and older siblings had lived in Jarral de Progreso, in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. When the Revolution began there in 1910, his father Sabas moved to Morelia to join the forces of Emiliano Zapata. As the war turned against them, the Medranos—like many other Mexican peasants—fled their homes on foot. For a year and a half they moved slowly northward, losing one child to hunger along the way, until they arrived in Dallas, where Pancho’s uncle Bruno Franco had recently landed a high-paying job at the Lone Star Gas company. During Pancho’s childhood, the family lived in a single room apartment that lacked indoor plumbing, running water, and electricity. Medrano remembers facing poverty that often included depending on charity for even staple foods. When his mother took him and his siblings to white sections of Dallas they were refused access to restaurants, movie theaters, and public swimming pools and parks.109

108 This biography draws on a wide range of printed sources as well as two principle oral history interviews: Pancho Medrano, interview by George Green and Carr Winn, OH 12, Dallas, August 4, 1971 TLA-UTA; and José Angel Gutiérrez, “Oral History Interview with Francisco Medrano,” CMAS 37, Tejano Voices, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries [hereinafter TV-UTA], (Dallas, June 27, 1996). Whenever possible I verified oral statements in printed sources. When that was impossible I primarily use oral evidence that appeared in both Medrano interviews, separated by twenty-five years and conducted by different interviewers with vastly different social locations. I also attempt to corroborate oral sources other than Pancho Medrano using written records, which themselves are deeply flawed and mediated as sources of truth. Medrano’s own papers and several other manuscript collections at the Texas Labor Archives (TLA-UTA) proved indispensable to reconstructing his story.

Yet Pancho caught a break, or rather, a streak of good luck that reveals both the myriad obstacles facing ethnic Mexicans who sought to improve their condition and the slight yet critically important opening created by the New Deal. In 1927 Pancho had enrolled in the brand new St. Anne's Catholic school near his house. Classes were taught in Spanish, and he got a decent education there through the eighth grade. Like many Mexican American students, he then enrolled Crozier Tech High School, but he stuck out like a sore thumb because of his marginal class position. He wore patched clothes and shoes recently purchased for twenty-five cents from the Salvation Army—his first pair. On his first day the principal called Pancho into his office and chided him for his appearance. He arranged for Pancho to work for a friend of his at a rock quarry near Love Field airport, adding that Pancho should earn some money so he could buy better clothes and come back to school. A project of the New Deal’s Civilian Conservation Corps, the quarry depended upon “Mexicans” to perform the physically strenuous work, but despite its demanding nature it still offered Pancho a relatively lucrative job at the quarry.


height of the Great Depression. After working there a little more than a year, through 1937, Pancho encountered a young white foreman who approached him and told him about a War Training School operated by the Works Progress Administration downtown. He asked if Pancho was “born here” in the U.S., then gave him the school’s address and advised him to “go clean.” Pancho passed both the citizenship and the cleanliness tests and quickly found himself learning how to buck and shoot rivets for airplane manufacturing. When he became proficient, the school sent him to the nearby town of Grand Prairie to work at North American Aviation, a massive bomber plant that won numerous defense contracts and grew to employ over 30,000 workers by the peak of World War II. While many Mexican Americans hoped to improve their lot by joining the military, Medrano rode the New Deal into industrial employment, seizing the rare opportunity created by federal government intervention in the labor market.

In 1943, soon after getting the lucrative job at North American, Pancho met a group of organizers from the United Auto Workers (UAW) distributing leaflets outside the plant gates. The literature emphasized the organization’s policy on race: Pancho later remembered, “What attracted me, in the front of...the union pamphlets it always says that

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111 Work there was “Hard, Hard...just like being a slave,” Pancho later remembered. Medrano, interview with Gutiérrez, TV-UTA, pp. 22-23. Also see “Unionists’ Reunion” clipping, ca. 1968.
114 Carlos Blanton similarly notes in his work on scholar George I. Sanchez that many of the so-called “Mexican American Generation” likewise gained access to a degree of first-class citizenship through the democratic impulse of liberal New Deal initiatives, a fact that would guide their political activism for decades to come. Carlos K. Blanton, “George I. Sánchez, Ideology, and Whiteness in the Making of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement, 1930-1960,” Journal of Southern History 72, no. 3 (August 2006): 569-604.
in the union there shall be no discrimination against anybody because of his race, color, or creed, and sex.”

Pancho joined the organizers in signing up new members, but at the same time white supremacy continued to reign in the plant. Pancho was one of only a half-dozen Mexican American workers, and these few tried to gather together daily at lunch for mutual support. Almost all African Americans in the plant worked as janitors, a position despised by whites that nonetheless represented one of the best jobs available for black men in the Jim Crow South. For his part, although he was a skilled tradesman Pancho had trouble acquiring tools from the “crib attendant” who readily supplied them to white workers. Many white workers saw him as racially inferior and therefore refused to work with him. Medrano’s relatively dark skin may have worked against him, but such treatment of ethnic Mexicans was hardly unusual in Texas at the time. The resistance of white workers did not dampen Pancho’s enthusiasm for the union. Scholars continue to debate the finer points of the industrial union movement’s record on race, which clearly fell short of what many contemporary “civil rights unionists” desired. Apparently the

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115 Medrano, interview with Gutiérrez, TV-UTA, p. 44. See also Medrano, interview with Green and Winn, TLA-UTA, pp. 16-17; “Unionists’ Reunion” clipping, ca. 1968; Castro, “The Medranos” DTH; Ruiz, “A Lifetime Struggle for Rights” FWST; Medrano Post Office Building, H1493. On the union drive generally, see Gene Lantz, “Milestones in UAW Local 848 History,” Labor History from Texas (online) http://www.labordallas.org/hist/848miles.htm (accessed March 14, 2009). Lantz, UAW Local 848’s archivist and newsletter editor, also published a number of short pieces on Medrano on his site.

116 Medrano, interview with Green and Winn, TLA-UTA, pp. 12, 14-15, 17-19; “Pancho Walked and Talked Union,” Texas Aerospacer; Cobler, “Unidad,” DMN; Medrano Post Office Building, H1493; Ruiz, “A Lifetime Struggle for Rights” FWST; Email from Gene Lantz to author, November 2, 2008; Typed Fieldnotes on conversation with Gene Lantz, Dallas, November 12, 2008; Typed Fieldnotes on conversation with Ricardo Medrano, Dallas, November 2, 2008. On the experience of African American workers at LTV / Chance-Vought (successor companies at the North American Aviation / Temco site), see: Typed Fieldnotes on UAW 848 Black Retirees, Grand Prairie, November 13, 2008; and Davis West, Clarence Barrett, Larond Daniels, Roosevelt Love, Douglas Smith, oral history group interview with author and Joseph Abel, Dallas, November 20, 2008 (audio recording in author’s possession).
written anti-discrimination commitments of the UAW proved enough to convince Medrano that the union should and could serve to counter the discrimination he encountered in the plant.

North American followed the pattern of many other large companies by responding to the unionization effort with both carrot and stick. One of the carrots was the expansion of the company’s sports department, which offered employees recreational facilities as part of a broader paternalist (or welfare capitalist) attempt to demonstrate compassion for the workers.¹¹⁷ In Grand Prairie, North American installed a boxing ring in a central courtyard. When Pancho first approached it, a large number of white workers queued up for the chance to beat up one of the few Mexican Americans in the plant. But Pancho had an ace up his sleeve—his neighborhood church had introduced him to the sport as a kid and he had intermittently trained at a storied African American gym in South Dallas. He quickly dispatched his first challenger, and then several more. Each day thereafter, he fought several white workers one-by-one during his “lunch hour,” while thousands of other workers cheered on the boxers. Little by little his skills in the ring accomplished what his skill on the shop floor could not: it won him acceptance among his white, male co-workers.¹¹⁸


By the time the company fired him for his union activity, Pancho was well-known across the plant. Countless workers recognized him from the boxing ring as he stood by the plant gates holding union cards, and they rapidly signed up to join the UAW. His efforts, along with those of fellow organizers and black janitors—who distributed and collected union cards as they gathered trash throughout the vast industrial complex—led to the union's victory in a certification election in 1943. Pancho got his job back as part of the settlement. He and his family moved into a new government-built housing project named (without irony) Little Mexico Village, where he enjoyed basic electrical and plumbing services for the first time in his life. He continued to box in the company league, and each day he ran the nearly fifteen miles to work to stay in shape. He traveled the country to fight workers first from other North American plants and later professionally. He gained a reputation as a stand up union man, and his white co-workers in the jig building department elected him to serve as their shop steward.

The New Deal and wartime defense contracts had opened the door for Medrano to enter skilled industrial employment, while the federal government’s new commitment to quality, affordable housing brought him and his family improved living conditions.

Texan racial hierarchies constantly threatened his advancement on the shop floor, and

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120 Lantz, “Milestones in UAW Local 848 History”; Fieldnotes on Lantz 11/12/08; “Transcript of Tape on 'History of Local 645' Made by Jack Anderson in 1994,” collected and transcribed by Gene Lantz, UAW Local 848 Records, 1937-1994 (includes Locals 645 and 390), unprocessed collection, Accession 95-66, Box 1, TLA-UTA; Email from Lantz to author 11/2/08; Medrano Post Office Building, H1493.

age-old Southern union busting nearly cost him his new job. But his ability to fight—
both physically and in terms of standing up for the union—won him credibility despite
the white supremacist culture that dominated midcentury Texas.

North American shut down after the war and re-opened as Temco in 1946, and
Pancho again led the effort to reorganize the union. But he couldn’t get a job at the
plant—he applied repeatedly but never got a call back. He appealed to Local 390
President Joe Ivy for help. Joe called the company’s human resources representative and
was told that Pancho “‘looks too much like a Negro to be hired.’” The UAW anti-
discrimination contract clause prohibited such an act, so when Joe protested, the company
relented and agreed to rehire Pancho. Medrano returned to the Temco HR office, just
fifteen minutes after his previous visit, but his application had been lost “in the
wastebasket.” He filled out the questionnaire again and went back to work—three years
after he first applied for his old job.122

Pancho became more active than ever in the labor movement. Throughout the
1950s Local 390 elected him to serve as a delegate to the Dallas Central Labor Council,
where he later won election to the executive post of Sergeant-at-Arms (he was a
heavyweight champion, after all). He also represented his local at the Texas AFL-CIO’s
annual state conventions and served as chairman of the 1962 meeting’s Latin American
Affairs Committee.123 When he wasn’t working or boxing professionally, he participated

123 “Union Body Names Chief,” Dallas Morning News, May 17, 1957; Medrano, interview with Green and
Winn, TLA-UTA, p. 21; List of delegates to Texas AFL-CIO convention proceedings (year unknown),
photocopy, in UAW Local 848 records, 1941-1989 (includes Local 893), unprocessed collection,
Accession 91-42, Box 1, TLA-UTA; “Pancho Walked and Talked Union,” Texas Aerospacer; Gene Lantz,
in any organizing campaign he could join. Beginning as early as 1951, he aided the decades-long struggle of meat packing workers at the Neuhoff Brothers plant in Dallas. Speaking Spanish to the Mexican American workers, he was able talk to them about the union on the loading dock of the plant during breaks from work, right under the bosses' noses. At the same time he took pains to meet with the plant's black workers and convinced them to join. He held meetings for various union campaigns in the community room at Little Mexico Village until housing administrators, fearing controversy, prohibited the practice.124

By the early 1960s, Pancho had helped African American and Mexican American workers organize and join the previously all-white Carpenters union. Scotty’s Aluminum company called the police to scare him away but the organizing drive succeeded nonetheless. At the William Cameron factory, he helped his son Pancho Jr. bring in the

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124 Medrano, interview with Green and Winn, TLA-UTA, pp. 22-23, 28; Fieldnotes on Ricardo Medrano 11/2/08; “Vote Won at Neuhoff, Union Says,” n.d., printed flyer in Pancho Medrano Papers, AR55, Box 1, Folder 8, TLA-UTA. Medrano remembers this taking place in 1951-52; his son Ricardo, born in 1944, recalls attending early union activities there “as a kid.” From World War II through the 1960s, Neuhoff was a constant but elusive target for two rival unions, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and the United Packinghouse Workers of America. I have not yet been able to date the flyer cited above, nor determine precisely how the long struggle ended. It is clear that Pancho had ties to organizers in both unions and probably aided both groups’ efforts at the plant at different points during the 1950s and 60s. Medrano’s professional boxing career drew many hits in a search of the Dallas Morning News archive index. See, for example, “Medrano Signs for Friday Fight,” Dallas Morning News, May 12, 1948. It appears he went pro shortly after the war, just before North American closed and re-opened as Temco. Medrano, interview with Gutiérrez, TV-UTA, pp. 42-43; Cobler, “Unidad,” DMN; Bob Ray Sanders, “Activist’s Life Was a Fight for Justice,” Fort Worth Star-Telegram, April 10, 2002; Simnacher, “Francisco Medrano Sr.” DMN; Ruiz, “A Lifetime Struggle for Rights” FWST; Lantz, “Dallas, and I, Remember Pancho Medrano” (online). Among other feats, he defeated the heavyweight champion of Mexico. “Unionists’ Reunion” clipping, ca. 1968; Medrano Post Office Building, H1493; “Medrano Was a Fighter,” Texas Aerospacer; Jim Lane, “Civil Rights Legend Pancho Medrano Honored,” People’s Weekly World (online) http://www.pww.org/article/articleprint/10139/ (accessed March 9, 2009). Lane also credits Medrano with “bring[ing] thousands of Black and Latino workers into unions.”
union. The junior Medrano became a shop steward and served on the Carpenters’ local negotiating committee.125

Medrano battled his way through poverty and discrimination in the barrio and overcame the white supremacist culture of the shop floor by proving himself a dedicated union man. His gradual acceptance in the ranks of the white-dominated labor movement stemmed from his boxing prowess and his extraordinary commitment to the union’s cause. Yet he was not entirely alone.

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George and Latane Lambert, the pair of socialist organizers who came to Texas and married during the pecan sheller movement in San Antonio, left town soon after the strike and traveled around the state and region before finally settling into a new home in East Dallas. George began working for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA, or “the Amalgamated”), a task that required him to travel extensively. The couple moved to Waco in February, 1939, and to Fort Worth later that year, when George became the Amalgamated’s state director. In the spring of 1939, Latane set out on her own, heading to Commonwealth College, a “resident labor school” in the Ouachita Mountains of Arkansas, where she met other wayward Southerners like herself as well as a number of well-known Old Left activists, led by school director Claude Williams. She

125 Medrano, interview with Green and Winn, TLA-UTA, pp. 24-28. Medrano remembers these campaigns taking place in 1959, but a 1963 flyer boasts that he “organized almost singlehandedly” at Cameron, Scott’s, and two other companies in April of that year. “Pancho’s Qualifications,” n.d. [May 1963], Medrano Papers, AR55-1-3. Medrano adds that the Carpenters union continued to resist civil rights at meetings of the Dallas Central Labor Council, even as the union grudgingly admitted black and Mexican American workers. The UAW leadership walked out of one meeting in protest to the Carpenters’ stance (p.25). See also clipping from Dallas Craftsmen, n.d. [1966], featuring Pancho and Robert Arredondo of Carpenters Local 2848, Medrano Papers, AR55-2-5.
became particularly close with singer-songwriter Lee Hays, the college’s music director, who is best known for singing bass in a pair of folk super-groups, first the Almanac Singers and later, the Weavers. The couple continued to bounce around Texas until the birth of their first child, David Lee, in San Antonio in July, 1939. The Lamberts made their way to Dallas soon after his birth.126

The couple continued to organize for the ACWA, other CIO unions, and in various political causes. In 1941, when George joined the Army, Latane took over many of his duties in the labor movement. By 1946, despite having a small child, Latane had “helped in almost every CIO effort in the state,” and she held the post of Regional Director for the ACWA. On May 6 of that year, Latane attended the Southwestern CIO Education Conference in Fort Worth, where she joined a group of four women activists as “union songbirds” who entertained the other attendees. The following week, Latane traveled to Atlantic City, New Jersey, to attend the international convention of the ACWA. She was one of several “rank and filers, Amalgamated organizers, who have worked in the South” who “took over” a session debating the union’s future participation in Operation Dixie. A white woman from Tennessee, a black man from New Orleans, and Lambert and another white woman union president from Dallas all appear in a feature article of a union publication after the gathering. While other spoke with optimism about the prospects of the Southern organizing campaign, the article reports that Lambert

126 Miscellaneous clippings, Lambert Papers, AR127-4-6. On George’s time in the Amalgamated, see Boxes 1 and 2. On Latane’s time at Commonwealth College, see Lambert Papers, AR127-4-10.
a distinctly good-looking person who has organized clothing and garment workers and nut pickers all through Texas...warned that “Operation Dixie” isn’t going to be a “cozy little affair.” Mrs. Lambert added, with a charming grin, “and while we are organizing, we will also do something definite about political reaction in Texas.”

In short, Latane continued to be a highly-respected activist in her own right, not merely filling in for George but offering her own ideas to help shape the future of labor and political organizing in Texas and across the South.

George returned from the War in 1946, and he resumed his duties at the Amalgamated. It is unclear if or when Latane left the union job, or whether she was asked to step aside to accommodate her returning G.I. husband. It is clear that within a few years she was again on the road working as a union organizer, this time for the United Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers, AFL. In 1949 and into 1950, Latane worked to train a new field representative, Cora Valentine, while supporting organizing campaigns in El Paso and Corsicana, Texas, as well as Greenville, Alabama. Throughout the 1950s, Lambert joined a group of women organizers in various garment and clothing workers unions who traveled together around North Texas in order to bring more and more women into the house of labor.

In 1951, George resigned his post with the Amalgamated to become a “full time political organizer” in and around Dallas. There, in the 1950s, writes the labor-published *Dallas Craftsman*, “he and his wife organized [a] ‘Get-out the vote’ campaign for the

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127 “‘In the South... We Want to Walk With Our Heads Up,’” clipping from unknown ACWA publication, n.d. [1946], copy in Lambert Papers, AR127-4-6.
NAACP which became a national model for effective voter participation in the Democratic Party.”

As this quotation suggests, labor, civil rights, and political action blended seamlessly in the daily organizing of both George and Latane Lambert. For the next six years, until they moved back to San Antonio in 1957, the couple operated a mom-and-pop political consulting firm, working as freelance organizers for a wide variety of liberal electoral causes and cobbling together a living from a series of temporary jobs. They simultaneously continued to volunteer as leaders of numerous civic groups. The historical record rarely specifies whether or not they were paid for a particular task. But it does clearly show a tremendous range and successful record of protracted, diverse activism. In short, in conservative Dallas at the height of the Cold War, George and Latane Lambert continued to carry forward the expansive vision forged in the trenches of the labor movement of the 1930s and 40s.

George quickly became a local leader of Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), the national mass-membership organization of liberals founded in 1947 by liberal Democrats and labor activists who opposed the rise of the Progressive Party and the remnants of the Communist left. He also chaired the Dallas area branch of the Texas Social and Legislative Conference, a political coalition founded by the Texas State CIO Council in 1944 that grew to include the TSFL and 21 other affiliates by 1950. The group represented an early effort to build a multiracial political coalition in Texas. Its affiliates included the American G. I. Forum, a Mexican American veterans’ organization.

formed in 1947, and the “Progressive Voter’s League,” the state’s largest African American political association that included many former activists of the NAACP. The Conference organized local gatherings across the state and had close ties to numerous like-minded local organizations. All were effective in mobilizing white working-class voters in the early 1950s, but the conference fizzled after the two labor federations began cutting its funding in 1954.  

For his part, Lambert bounced back and forth between Washington D.C., Detroit, and Dallas as he continued to work for the ADA, local and national liberal political campaigns, and ongoing efforts to collaborate with civil rights organizations in Texas. In 1953, for example, Lambert dove headlong into a local civil rights struggle alongside the Dallas branch of the NAACP. When the Dallas Railway & Terminal Company, a private contractor, brought the city council a proposal to increase transit fares, Lambert fired off a telegram protesting the increase to Mayor R. L. Thornton. Along with Carl Brannin, the former Socialist organizer who now served as the vice-chair of the local ADA, Lambert attempted unsuccessfully to delay the council’s hearing on the issue. The mayor ignored their request, but Lambert and the NAACP’s U. Simpson Tate dominated the discussion at the hearing. Lambert was the “most outspoken” of more than a dozen individuals who spoke out against the proposal, reported the *Dallas Morning News*. He argued that fares should be cut, not increased, noting that the company maintained large reserve account in violation of its contract with the city. Tate, the paper added, “presented the same argument” and “challenged” the company’s claim of increased

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operating costs. A photograph accompanying the front-page article shows Lambert dressed in business attire and pointing to a squiggly but descending line on a large graph, attempting to demonstrate that low ridership was a symptom of high fares, not the cause of lesser profits for the transit company. The city council rejected the company’s bid for a fare increase, marking the first time that it had done so after granting increases seven times since 1946. The ADA chapter continued its study in hopes of winning a fare decrease at a future date.  

As the “most outspoken” voice in opposition to the fare increase, Lambert brought public visibility and a degree of legitimacy to the NAACP’s cause. His presence made it impossible for the city to dismiss it as a merely black/white dispute, while his public speaking skills and well-groomed appearance caught the attention of the city’s very conservative daily newspaper. The NAACP’s Tate “presented the same argument,” but it is likely that it would have been ignored without the presence of Lambert and the ADA. Beating the fare increase itself may have been a minor victory, but it was nonetheless a significant one.

In addition to winning the immediate fight, the transit fare conflict deepened Lambert’s ties to the state and local branches of the NAACP. In October, 1953, he accompanied the Dallas delegation to the Association’s 17th annual state convention in San Antonio. Tate, attorney and branch leader W. J. Durham, state leader A. Maceo

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Smith, and youth leader Juanita Craft—all of Dallas—joined him at the conference, titled “Freedom’s Fight for Full Democracy.” Lambert shared his experiences and thoughts for a panel on “Techniques for Improving Inter-Group Relations in Texas.” He likely attended and participated in audience discussions at other panels, including one on civil rights featuring Maury Maverick, Jr., and George L. P. Weaver of the national CIO and another on labor led by A. R. Hardesty of Dallas, the white chairman of the Texas CIO Committee on Human Rights. NAACP national president Roy Wilkins joined Lambert and the other delegates to offer remarks in preparation for holding the association’s national convention in Dallas in 1954.131

By that time, both George and Latane Lambert had become the primary liaisons between the Dallas’ black and white communities. As members of the local NAACP, the couple served on committees within the local branch while tying the association to white liberals in the ADA, organized labor, and other liberal Democrats. In late 1955, for example, Latane joined the NAACP’s local coordinating committee to plan a “Bill of Rights Day” rally to take place in Dallas in January, 1956. Correspondence regarding the event between A. Maceo Smith and Roy Wilkins was carbon-copied to the Lamberts.132 Likewise, when the ADA and other white liberal groups sought electoral and other alliances with African Americans, the Lamberts served as their point of entrée. In late 1954, George Lambert reported to the Poll Tax Committee of the Democratic Organizing Committee (a local remnant of the Texas Social and Legislative Conference) that he had

132 Letter from A. Maceo Smith to Roy Wilkins, November 28, 1955, and reply dated December 2, 1955, both in Lambert Papers, AR127-4-5.
conducted a study of the recent runoff election and selected “priority precincts” in which to focus their voter registration and poll tax collection efforts in January, 1955. Lambert was charged with contacting the NAACP and coordinating the drive in four key black districts, out of a total of fifteen “priority precincts” that his study identified. In other words, the group’s registration effort depended heavily upon the NAACP and black precincts, and Lambert was the guy who was given the responsibility of crossing the color line to deliver these critical voters.\(^\text{133}\) Latane Lambert surely participated in this drive as well, as she became a member and then officer of several Democratic women’s clubs in Dallas.\(^\text{134}\)

Like Pancho Medrano, George and Latane Lambert inhabited the wide space between the lily-white, red scared unionism of the TSFL and the radical alternative proposed by the UPWA. They made tentative progress through a series of small victories. They drew upon their experience in the pecan shellers’ strike and the clothing workers unions to develop a pragmatic but radically interracial approach to politics in a staunchly conservative city at the height of the Cold War. After leaving the Amalgamated, the Lamberts developed close ties with the NAACP and redirected their political efforts into the ADA, the TS&LC, and local poll tax drives. They won minor feats in cases like the transit fares, but the more enduring legacy was the bond they developed with the city’s African American civil rights activists. Such ties became the


foundation of experiments in interracial electoral alliances that, in turn, would develop more fully in the 1960s.

**Civil Rights Unionism Survives in Houston**

While Medrano and the Lamberts fought for the survival of liberalism in the state’s most conservative city, their counterparts in Houston began to make progress. To be sure, black and brown working people remained largely disenfranchised in all of the state’s urban areas. Houston no longer supported the mass mobilizations of the civil rights unionist movement that flourished in the 1930s and 40s, as organized labor turned its back on black civil rights and especially after the State of Texas successfully dismantled the NAACP. Yet African American activists in the Bayou City respond to Cold War repression not by retreating but by redirecting their efforts into new channels. They continued to join segregated unions, they continued to collaborate in their neighborhoods, and above all, they worked to organize and then wield their newfound power at the ballot box.

Their renewed focus on electoral politics slowly begot new alliances that cross the color line and in turn carved out new space for civil rights organizing on the ground. In 1949, African Americans organized their electoral power into a *mono*-racial coalition, the Harris County Council of Organizations (HCCO), a cross-class, diverse amalgamation that included not only black trade unionists and working-class community organizers but also African American businessmen, ministers, doctors, lawyers, and university administrators. As the 1950s wore on and the HCCO started to effectively wield a bloc
vote, their endorsement of candidates became a hot commodity that myriad other factions in the city hoped to secure. The former civil rights unionists within the HCCO, led by railway clerk Moses LeRoy, worked to steer the Council toward forming partnerships with select groups of ethnic Mexican and white workers and liberal political activists. This strategy was controversial and never entirely accepted within the all-black HCCO, yet LeRoy and the Council’s liberal and labor activists nonetheless struck out on their own and began experimenting in multi-racial coalitions. They found willing partners in the liberal faction of LULAC Council #60, led by John J. Herrera, as well as the Harris County Democrats (HCD), a predominately-white, marginal caucus of the local Democratic Party led by the city’s most unwavering liberals—a group of longtime labor lawyers.

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As Moses LeRoy noted (see Chapter 1), the Progressive Party movement of 1948 failed to elect candidates in Houston, but the contentious campaign that year did alert local officials and Democratic Party leaders to the arrival of the black vote. As the Cold War narrowed the range of possibilities available to civil rights activists, many African Americans sought to focus instead on unifying the city’s diverse black community into a single bloc vote. Their vehicle was the Harris County Council of Organizations (HCCO), a cross-class coalition founded in 1949 that grew to include over sixty black political and civic groups.\(^{135}\) Originally conceived as the electoral arm of the NAACP, the Council

\(^{135}\) No comprehensive history of the HCCO exists. The best available secondary source on black politics in Houston is Chandler Davidson, *Biracial Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Metropolitan South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972). Its founding in 1949 is included in “Blacks in Office to
ended up replacing the older group as the hub of black political life in Houston. Longtime association activists like LeRoy and barber George Nelson seamlessly transitioned into the new organization. For his part, LeRoy became a key organizer of the HCCO despite having been “branded a red [herring]” for his support of fair employment during and after World War II. In 1949, he attended the Council’s founding meetings along with several other black labor leaders, including James E. Middleton of the Hod Carriers and Common Laborers union Local #18, representatives of the all-black Longshoremen’s (ILA) Local #872, and R. R. Grovey, the CIO organizer who (along with Moses and Erma LeRoy) led the neighborhood-based Third Ward Civic Club. Together these labor and community activists already had decades of experience organizing in labor and civil rights campaigns, and they now promised to return to their core constituency to build electoral

Increase in 1972 Elections,” *Houston Chronicle*, April 16, 1972, 20, in LeRoy Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, HMRC. The following pages are based primarily on my fieldwork in May 2010, supplemented by the vertical files at the Texas Southern University Archives (TSU-A) and various small collections at the HMRC. Also see LeRoy interview by Davidson, 22-24, and Davidson’s “Notes on Interview with Mr. LeRoy, Jan. 25, 1979,” in the same folder (Davidson Texas Politics Research Collection, WRC-RICE, MS 259, Box 9, Folder 6). For a who’s who of the HCCO’s early leaders, see the plaque posted outside the council’s office in Houston’s Third Ward. On the early history of Local 18, see the following Proceedings of the Texas State Federation of Labor: 48th Convention June 24-27, 1946, Houston, 200-201; 49th Convention, June 30 to July 3, 1947, Dallas, 193-194, 221-224; 50th Convention, June 21-25, 1948, Fort Worth, 138-139, 209-211, 235; 51st Convention, June 21-25, 1949, Beaumont, Texas, 143-145, 154-155; 52nd Convention, June 26-29, 1950, San Antonio, 101, 136-138—all in TLA-UTA. Also see Lee A. Lewis, interview by George N. Green, October 4, 1971 Houston, Texas, TLA-UTA, OH 22, 25-30, 33-34. On ILA Local 872, see informal conversations between author and retirees from ILA Local 872, Houston ILA Retirees Association meeting at the ILA Local 1351 hall, Houston, May 19, 2010; Author’s Voice Memos on conversation with Tommy Roy, Houston, May 25, 2010; “Personal Telephone Directory and Local History of I. L. A. 872.” ca. 1960, digital photographs in author’s possession, courtesy Tommy Roy. On Everett’s replacement by Middleton, see Howard Middleton, Jr., interview by author, digital audio recording in author’s possession, Houston, May 5 and 31, 2010.

136 The original quotation reads “red hearing.” “Black Politics: A Time for Action,” *The Commercial Newsletter* (Houston), November 18, 1971, 5, in LeRoy Collection, Box 1, Folder 5, HMRC. Besides LeRoy’s support for the Progressives and his close ties to Lulu White, this is the only reference to LeRoy’s possible affiliation with the Communist Party.
power. This gave them a potential base of power within the broader HCCO—a group of possible voters that black professionals within the Council would otherwise be unlikely to reach. At the same time, LeRoy and company connected that base to their social betters.

Some years earlier, in 1940, Grovey described the target demographics and long-term goals of the Third Ward Civic Club:

“We didn’t go out and organize school teachers and the doctors and write down a program for the “little” Negroes. We called the washerwoman, the maid, the ditch-digger, the businessman, the cook, the preacher, the hod carrier, the dentist, the bricklayer, the teacher, the longshoremen, and the gentleman of the press. It is our aim that in working out our problems, the doctor and washerwoman will sit down together; and the newspaperman will sit down with the hod carrier; and the dentist and the dock worker will join, all in a common cause that will free the Negro from the shackles of economic and political slavery.”

Of course, the hod carriers and longshoremen also had their own, well-organized base that could be mobilized for electoral power. As noted above, Laborers Local #18 and Longshoremen’s Local #872 had long been the established bastions of the black labor movement. Years before the founding of the HCCO, the two waterfront locals supported Freeman Everett’s war for the inclusion of African Americans in the Texas State Federation of Labor. After the threats of county sheriffs and Klansmen grounded Everett, leading to his retirement, a new, younger group of leaders slowly gained control of the two unions. James E. “Jimmie” Middleton, a longtime shop floor leader who helped launch the HCCO, became president of the Laborer’s Local #18 by mid-decade. He did so, in all likelihood, thanks to his ties to black businessmen, his work in the Council, and with the support of the major white contractors’ associations. Under

Middleton’s leadership, the union grew rapidly as did the quantity of union work.
Likewise, Everett’s retirement from local office in the ILA Local #872 led to a string of
new leaders, culminating in the 1955 election of new president Raymond Duncan, who
quickly increased the role of the union in the community as well as its physical presence
by building in a new, shiny union hall along the docks.\footnote{Middleton interview by author; “Personal Telephone Directory and Local History of I. L. A. 872.”
Middleton interview; “Bill Elliott Announces for Reelection as County Judge,” \textit{Houston Post}, February 4, 1962, Adair Collection, Box 1, Folder 11.}

LeRoy and other black labor activists in the HCCO thus depended upon a vibrant,
working-class base, but their membership in a cross-class, diverse coalition required that
they also work with African American elites. Through careful negotiation, HCCO
members elected a representative group of officers that could, in turn, connect with a
wide range of voters in each of the city’s several black neighborhoods. Throughout the
early 1950s, the HCCO continued to organize, working largely under the radar but also
endorsing and turning out voters for white candidates in several key local races.

Council leaders and even the smaller subset of labor delegates frequently
disagreed internally about how to best utilize their growing bloc vote. One faction, which
included Middleton of the Laborers Local #18, forged a tight relationship with County
Judge Bill Elliott, the chief administrator of Harris County.\footnote{Middleton interview by author; “Personal Telephone Directory and Local History of I. L. A. 872.”
Middleton interview; “Bill Elliott Announces for Reelection as County Judge,” \textit{Houston Post}, February 4, 1962, Adair Collection, Box 1, Folder 11.}
Their support for his
campaigns resulted in various forms of patronage, including the awarding of local
contracts to builders who hired members of Middleton’s fast-growing union. At the same
time, other members of the HCCO, led by LeRoy, worked to mobilize the Council behind
a wide range of labor organizing and civil rights causes—which, at times, put the HCCO
at odds with the same local authorities whom other Council members had just helped to elect!

In other words, disagreements over political strategy and tactics raged within the so-called “black community of Houston,” as well as among the leaders of the city’s black unions. The HCCO’s diverse leadership did its best to contain such internal differences and to direct community organizers toward the realm of electoral politics, but they were only partially successful in both objectives. Generally, the patronage politics of Middleton and most African American professionals managed to coexist with LeRoy’s community activism. Black businessmen often responded positively to LeRoy’s calls to contribute to the development of black community institutions, including the Blue Triangle branch of the YWCA, of which Erma was an officer. The LeRoys then reciprocated by holding their noses and campaigning for the best available compromise candidate endorsed by the entire HCCO.

The cross-class and at times compromise-centric Council did not, however, shy away from taking public stands in support of civil rights—probably due to the ongoing influence of the LeRoys. For example, in 1958, the HCCO “launched a boycott move” against the Houston school board after the body planned to require special summer instruction for black teachers. While district administrators claimed that the program would close an “academic gap” between white and black teachers, the HCCO responded that their plan was an “insult” and recommended that African American teachers and principals stay home in protest. The Council met in a private session to determine its
course of action, but it planned to mobilize “a large Negro delegation” to show up at the next school board meeting.\footnote{“Negro Groups Move to Upset Teacher Plan,” \textit{Houston Chronicle}, March 24, 1958, microfiche in Houston Chronicle Morgue, HMRC [hereinafter HCM-HMRC], filed under “Harris County Council of Organizations” [hereinafter HCCO].}

Perhaps as an outgrowth of this activity, the HCCO achieved a major breakthrough in 1958 when it helped elect Mrs. Charles E. White to the local school board. Mrs. White (Hattie Mae was her given name, though she never used it publicly) became the city’s first black elected official since Reconstruction. White’s election from a heavily-black but not majority-black district “shocked the conservative political establishment” and drew the ire of local white supremacist vigilantes. One retrospective on her life adds that the “car windshield was splintered by air rifle pellets and a gasoline-soaked cross was set ablaze in her yard after the election.” The white supremacists’ fears were somewhat confirmed soon after Mrs. White took office, when she publicly withdrew her support for a tax hike and bond issue at the request of the HCCO. The Council argued that both proposals represented “another attempt of the school board to maintain segregation” and promised an “active campaign” in opposition to the measures.\footnote{Jennifer Radcliffe, “Celebrating Black History Month: Elected official Hattie Mae White,” \textit{Houston Chronicle}. February 13, 2011, online \url{http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/7425991.html} (accessed May 7, 2011) (first and second quotations); “Negro Group Fight on School Bonds Growing,” \textit{Houston Chronicle}, May 12, 1959, HCM-HMRC, HCCO (third and fourth quotations). Radcliffe adds that Mrs. White served nine years until conservatives finally defeated her in 1967.}

The HCCO adopted an even more militant stance in 1959 when it staged a campaign to protest police brutality. Pulling no punches, Council President Aloysius Wickliff sent a complaint letter to the police chief and mayor charging Houston police
with making “mass arrests” of African Americans “without just cause.” Claiming that they had signed affidavits documenting numerous cases of abuse, HCCO complained that police officers routinely picked up black residents and falsely charged them with drunkenness and at times planned “preconceived” sweeps conducted solely to boost the police department’s number of arrests. Wickliff added that black prisoners were frequently crammed into paddy wagons or jail cells and then sometimes “abused” or “intimidated”—and some even died “under peculiar circumstances” while in custody. The department’s top “brass” also harassed the few black officers on the force, dispatchers used the word “nigger” on the radio, and some white officers demanded that their black counterparts remove their hats in their presence.142

The issue was promptly swept under the rug by the mayor, and it may have remained there had an extraordinary case of police brutality not surfaced less than two weeks later. Eldrewey Stearns, a twenty-six year graduate student at Houston’s all-black Texas Southern University, claimed that he was beaten and “degraded to the level of a dog” after being stopped and arrested on traffic charges. “I was dragged behind a closed door in the jail and held by one officer while two others beat me,” Stearns told the city’s lead daily newspaper, the *Houston Chronicle*. HCCO leaders had not received a formal reply to their earlier complaint, and they had not yet decided on a future course of action when they learned about Stearns’ arrest and beating. The case led the Council to renew their calls that the mayor launch a wholesale investigation of routine police brutality.

Stearns testified before the City Council and identified the badge numbers of the two jailers who beat him. (The following year, Stearns would emerge as the leader of the student sit-in movement.)

The close ties of some HCCO members to Houston’s white elites did not, then, prohibit the organization from taking militant action in support of black civil rights. Rather, like the NAACP before it, the Council put forth a surprisingly broad agenda for building black political power and first-class citizenship. Despite the obstacles presented by at-large voting, place elections, and the poll tax, the HCCO successfully organized and wielded a black bloc vote. It endorsed and elected the best available white candidates and at times ran its own African American candidates.

And when their normal repertoire of tactics failed, the HCCO ran a black candidate despite impossible odds, apparently in order to register a protest vote. In September 1959, following the city’s refusal to address their complaint regarding police brutality, HCCO leaders announced that it would support Rev. Edward V. Hill, a black Baptist minister, for a seat on the City Council. Hill became the first black candidate for this at-large office since Rev. L. H. Simpson ran in 1946 with support from the NAACP. Hill promised to serve “all the people” but highlighted his race and working-class background: “I believe my ability to serve the city will be aided by my having come up

143 “Negro Student Claims Two Cops Beat Him,” Houston Chronicle, August 26, 1959 (all quotations); John Lash, “Negroes Renew Probe Demand,” Houston Chronicle, August 25, 1959. The District Attorney eventually replied that the HCCO’s charges were without merit. “D.A. Says Cops Doing Fine Job,” Houston Chronicle, September 4, 1959. All in HCM-HMRC, HCCO.
through the lower income bracket and by being a member of a minority group,” he said.  

Meanwhile, at the level of the grassroots, Moses LeRoy and other black unionists in the HCCO continued to fight for access to skilled jobs. LeRoy, the longtime Council parliamentarian, continued to work at the Southern Pacific, where he became even more active in his union. In 1951, an amendment to the Railway Labor Act prohibited racially exclusive union auxiliaries, but it did not end the practice of segregated local unions. LeRoy’s Local #1534 thus became an equal affiliate of the Brotherhood of Steamship and Railway Clerks, but it remained all-black and still depended upon the white local for collective bargaining. In 1955, LeRoy became president of the newly empowered local and traveled to Boston to attend the union’s international convention. There he introduced a floor resolution that “exposed the bias in the two lines of progression, showing that Negroes were prohibited from promotions out of Group 3...” As white delegates from Texas and the South sneered and “white-washed” the situation, union members from California and the Northeast cheered LeRoy’s courage. They picked him up and carried him around the convention hall and then bought him drinks afterward at a nearby bar!  

What one black worker called LeRoy’s “gallant fight” did not produce immediate and sweeping change in the Brotherhood, but it did result in at least one promotion back  

144 “Negro Baptist Pasto In City Council Race,” Houston Chronicle, September 23, 1959 (both quotations); “Negro Will Be In Race For City Council,” Houston Chronicle, September 22, 1959—both in HCM-HMRC, HCCO.  
145 “Negro Upped As Apprentice Stockman,” Houston Informer, January 28, 1956, in LeRoy Collection, Box 1, Folder 5, HMRC (first quotation); LeRoy interview with Green, 9, 11-13 (second quotation on 12).
at the Southern Pacific yards in Houston. M. J. Richmond, a former president of the black union auxiliary who had worked there since the 1930s, became an “apprentice section stockman” in a move that the Informer, an African American paper, claimed would “shatter a tradition of job discrimination in the company…” The unnamed author added that “Labor circles in Houston hailed the announcement as the biggest news in Southern labor relations and as a broad step toward wiping out job bias because of color...The promotion was a death blow to the old practice of two lines of progression...” LeRoy cautioned that much work remained to be done, but he still noted the historic nature of—and future possibilities presented by—Richmond’s promotion. It was, he said,

a great achievement in labor relations in the South. It proves that we can work together in harmony without friction in this democratic process. We are part and parcel of the labor movement and I don’t see why we should not be integrated in it. We are going to carry on until we reach our full objective of complete integration.146

As this newspaper report suggests, civil rights unionism in Houston was not as vibrant as it had been in the 1930s and 1940s, but it was far from dead. LeRoy continued to battle within the union and on the shop floor while bringing his experiences to bear in the broader Harris County Council of Organizations. Struggles for job promotions continued to dovetail with complaints against police brutality, the fight to desegregate schools, and the quest for autonomous political power. And as the decade wore on, LeRoy and the HCCO increasingly looked beyond their own segregated communities to find allies across the color line.

146 “Negro Upped As Apprentice Stockman,” Houston Informer, January 28, 1956, in LeRoy Collection, Box 1, Folder 5, HMRC (all quotations).
Little evidence survives that documents multi-racial coalition building in Houston in the 1950s, but it is clear that one faction of ethnic Mexican leaders in the Bayou City began establishing ties with black and white activists well before their efforts bore fruit in the mid-1960s. Led by attorney John J. Herrera, the liberal wing of LULAC Council #60 constantly pushed the historically-stolid civic organization to launch active civil rights campaigns, including efforts to address both racial and economic discrimination. These initiatives, in turn, led these liberal LULACers into political action and eventually coalitions with like-minded African American and white activists.

In his definitive community study, historian Arnoldo de León notes that ethnic Mexicans comprised only 5.8% of the Houston’s population in 1950 and “a similar” proportion in 1960, as both the “colonia” and the entire city more nearly doubled in size. As in Dallas, this relatively small group of the population remained primarily unskilled laborers, but in contrast to their counterparts in Big D, ethnic Mexicans in Houston lived in geographically distant neighborhoods from Magnolia to the east of downtown to el Segundo Barrio along the Ship Channel and pockets of the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Wards. Many community organizing efforts were contained in only one or two of these small enclaves, while a select few transcended neighborhood boundaries and brought in ethnic Mexican residents from throughout the city. At the dawn of the 1950s, LULAC Council #60 remained the oldest, largest, and most important of the latter type of organization. It began in the early 1930s and was composed primarily of “blue-collar workers;” but its composition, location, and political stances were constantly disputed.
throughout its long history, continuing through the 1970s. At times relatively conservative ethnic Mexican businessmen dominated its leadership and membership roles, while relatively liberal activists took control in other periods.¹⁴⁷

Herrera and the other liberal leaders advocated full civil rights for all ethnic Mexicans, beginning with working people and including both U.S. and Mexican citizens. LULAC served as a vehicle for the liberals’ activism, but so too did other parts of their private lives. As an attorney, Herrera dedicated much of his law practice to the fight for civil rights. Born in 1910 in Louisiana, Herrera joined LULAC in 1933, a year before he graduated from high school in Houston. He worked as a shoeshine boy, busboy, waiter and finally a union cab driver as he attended South Texas School of Law, an avocation that soon landed him in the middle of the struggle for fair employment practices. “From 1939 to 1943,” he later wrote, “acting on protest from Latin-Americans and negroes [sic], that the Houston Shipbuilding Corporation and Brown Shipbuilding Corporation were discriminating in employment matters, I gradually worked out an upgrading...so that by 1943 they were working in ALL CRAFTS and GRADES and one-third (1/3) of the personnel of the shipyards were of Mexican-Americans and one-third (1/3) were Negroes.” He was admitted to the bar in 1943 and immediately filed the state’s first formal FEPC complaint, a claim against Shell Oil Refinery “alleging discrimination against Negroes and Mexican-Americans” by both the company and the union. The fair employment campaigns helped revive Council #60, which had gone into decline during the Great Depression. After the war, Herrera aided FEPC investigator Carlos Castañeda

¹⁴⁷ Arnoldo De León, Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 98, 110, 126-142.
in petitioning Congress and the Truman administration to extend the agency’s mandate (it expired in 1946). He later joined the legal team led by San Antonio attorney Gus C. Garcia that represented LULAC and won two landmark civil rights cases—*Delgado v. Bastrop* (1948) and *Hernandez v. Texas* (1954) (See Chapter 3). In between, he served as the national president of LULAC for 1952-53, a period in which he traveled around the state organizing some fifty new local councils. Lauro Cruz, who became the city’s first ethnic Mexican state legislator in 1966, wrote that Herrera “was a lonely voice” in the late 1940s and early 1950s, organizing LULAC, dabbling in politics, and “in the courtroom representing clients who spoke no English and knew not their rights under the law...”148

As Cruz suggests, Herrera also led the entry of the liberal faction of ethnic Mexican civil rights activists into the political arena. In the late 1940s he worked for the unsuccessful U. S. Senate campaign of liberal ex-Governor Jimmy Allred and the successful bid to the same office of Lyndon B. Johnson in 1948. Throughout the 1950s, he traveled to the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas with attorney Gus Garcia, American G. I. Forum president Hector P. Garcia, and U. S. Senator Dennis Chavez of New Mexico. They sought to “stimulate voter interest and participation among Mexican-Americans” in the region, persuading them to “continue their loyalty to the Democratic Party” and to help “heretofore non-voters to become franchised citizens.” They gathered information

for their civil rights cases and conducted voter registration drives simultaneously. Hector Garcia later remarked that only Herrera had the “guts” to go to the town of Edna to “face the gun happy police in order to get the information we needed.” For fourteen years he broadcast a weekly Spanish-language program on radio station KLVL in which he “discuss[ed] current LULAC programs” before an audience of 300,000 Spanish-speaking listeners on the Texas Gulf Coast. Cruz adds that Herrera also used the show to urge ethnic Mexicans to pay their poll taxes and vote.149

In 1954, ’56, and ’58, Herrera ran unsuccessfully for a seat in the state legislature, campaigning with the backing of “a strong LABOR-NEGRO-LATIN coalition.” Evidence remains thin on these early races, but documents in Herrera’s personal collection suggest that he took public stands in support of black civil rights and organized labor and actively wooed these voters. He did not shy from controversy but made his politics plain at the front and center of his campaign announcement and platform:

1. I will vigorously oppose any action by the Legislature to circumvent the Supreme Court’s decision desegregating our schools. Too much of the citizens’ money has been spent by needlessly arguing and fostering racial bigotry and hatred...I believe that a sane tolerant approach to the desegregation problem with all representatives of all groups sitting across the table will be the ultimate solution...

2. In view of the increasingly serious economic situation and the unemployment problem, I am in favor a public works program financed by the Federal and State Governments...

... . . . .

8. As a member of organized labor and an organizer among the low income groups of both the AFL and CIO Unions, I will endorse any labor

149 Ibid. Message from Hector P. Garcia for Herrera’s testimonial dinner, September 11, 1980, Box 1, Folder 9, Herrera Papers, HMRC.
bill calculated to help organized labor and give management a fair hearing in connection with any bills affecting the working man in Texas.

In short, racial and economic justice represented the core issues of his candidacy. He also endorsed higher teacher salaries, complete opposition to the sales tax, tighter regulation of the insurance industry, and the legalization of liquor by the drink. In his third race in 1958, Herrera approached election day confident that he would finally win—despite the continuation of the poll tax and at-large elections that stacked the odds against him. He had garnered more than 30,000 votes in his previous effort, and he believed that his common-sense approach to legislating “person to person hand-shaking campaign” would convince voters of his “record as the champion of the underdog.” He planned a “final big push” with volunteer “telephone workers, ‘card pushers’ at the precincts, automobiles and drivers” to turn out all of his potential supporters on the critical day. His liberal platform and supporters in “a strong LABOR-NEGRO-LATIN coalition,” he hoped, would finally push him over the top.150

Herrera’s optimism proved misguided, as he again lost in 1958. Yet his early career as a civil rights, political, and labor activist all suggest that the liberal faction of ethnic Mexican activists were developing their own expansive agenda for racial and economic justice during this period. Herrera’s work in LULAC, in the courtroom, and in the electoral arena all combated discrimination as a nonwhite ethnic minority. Critically, as a candidate, Herrera sought and apparently gained support among African Americans

150 “Resume” (op cit; first and last quotations); “John J. Herrera Announces for Legislature Position No. 6,” undated letter with platform, 1-2 (block quotation); “Herrera Addresses Campaign Workers,” no date, 1 (next quotation on “hand-shaking”); Letter from Herrera to “Dear Friend,” undated 1958 campaign (quotations on “big push” and campaign workers)—all in Herrera Papers, Box 1, Folder 23, HMRC.
and organized labor. He did not, in historian Neil Foley’s words, make a “Faustian pact with whiteness,” positioning himself as white in order to distance himself from blacks, thereby contributing to maintenance of Jim Crow. Rather, he portrayed himself as the “champion of the underdog” who opposed segregation, demanded labor rights, and sought independent political power.

To be sure, another faction of conservative LULACers led by Houston restaurateur Felix Tijerina put forward an entirely different vision of ethnic Mexican civil rights and advocated a sharply divergent set of tactics to achieve their goals. Tijerina vehemently defended segregation and enforced it in his own restaurant. Like Herrera, he became a local LULAC officer and later its national president from 1956 to 1960. But historians of the Chicano/a experience in the 1950s have focused exclusively on what Foley admits is a “narrow band” of activists to the exclusion of everyone else.

Herrera’s life suggests that those ethnic Mexican civil rights advocates with ties to working people and labor developed a far more liberal political sensibility that encouraged coalition-building with not only whites but also African Americans. In fact, Herrera had much more in common with the city’s white labor lawyers and black labor activists like Moses LeRoy than he did with his co-ethnic Tijerina. The fault line dividing the ethnic Mexican community in the 1950s was clearer to contemporaries than it has been to historians. As a case in point, in 1952, Tijerina and company joined Governor Allan Shivers and the rest of the state’s Dixiecrats in endorsing Republican Dwight Eisenhower in the general presidential elections (Ike carried Texas, the first Republican victory there since Reconstruction). Herrera and the liberals in Houston
joined Pancho Medrano, the Lamberts, the LeRoys, and their counterparts of all races in San Antonio (see chapter 3) in campaigning for liberal Democrat Adlai Stevenson.

Class and ideology divided each ethnic group, so activists like LeRoy and Herrera sought to cross the color line for mutual support. Both the intra-ethnic divides and the inter-ethnic coalitions would emerge in much sharper relief in the 1960s, but their origins lay in the previous decades. Their deepening ties with the predominately white labor movement and white liberal Democrats would represent the final pieces of the emerging multi-racial electoral coalition in Houston and across the state.

**The Rise of “The Liberal Movement”**

In the fall of 1952 the Texas state Democratic Party experienced its second split in as many presidential election cycles. Four years earlier, Texas Dixiecrats joined the national protests of Southern Democrats who opposed the inclusion of a civil rights plank in the platform of Harry Truman’s re-election campaign. Then in 1952, when the national party nominated Adlai Stevenson, whom conservative Texans perceived as another liberal candidate who would support civil rights, conservative Democratic Governor Allan Shivers led the rest of the state’s delegation in supporting the Republican nominee, Dwight Eisenhower. The pattern repeated itself in 1956, with the same two candidates, and Shivers again denouncing the Democratic nominee and successfully carrying the state for the GOP in November. In each case, after being shouted or voted down at the state convention, a group of liberals assembled and staged their own counter-protests, forming an ad hoc caucus of self-proclaimed “loyal Democrats.”
As the decade wore on, these quadrennial rituals slowly produced an ongoing organization of mostly-white liberals that built upon the convention conflicts to secure permanent footholds in state and national politics. Their group obtained a major victory at the 1956 convention and the polls the following year, both of which provided hope for longtime activists and laid the groundwork for an expansion of their “liberal movement” into nonwhite communities.

The organization of white liberals began in 1952 when former state district judge Ralph W. Yarborough, an East Texas native living in Austin, decided to run for governor. A rather ambivalent gubernatorial candidate, Yarborough had once stood unsuccessfully for Attorney General, and he threw his hat in the ring in 1952 only after being slighted by the incumbent governor Shivers, who urged him not to run for that lesser post. Once on the campaign trail, Yarborough found active supporters among former student activists from the University of Texas and labor lawyers from the state’s leading firms in Houston and Dallas. He connected with urban industrial and craft workers as well as tenant and small farmers in his home region of the state, including, to his surprise, a large number of African Americans.\footnote{Patrick Cox, \textit{Ralph W. Yarborough, the People’s Senator}, 1st ed., Focus on American history series (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), chap. 1-5.}

Robert E. “Bob” Hall, a student at the University of Texas law school originally from the Rio Grande Valley, became Yarborough’s traveling advance man at the age of 21. Hall traveled one or two days ahead of the campaign caravan and finalized the logistical arrangements for the candidate’s varied appearances. It was not glamorous work. In most cases he arrived at a courthouse square in a small Texas county seat and
began asking nearby merchants for two things: a place to park a pickup truck that could double as a stage and bandstand, and an electrical hookup so they could plug in the campaign’s public address system. Consulting a three-ring binder that listed potential supporters, Hall also arranged meetings between the candidate and local donors, clubs, and individual voters. At every meeting large and small, and at every courthouse square, he worked to collect information from likely voters and slowly built the campaign’s low-tech mailing list and database. Dozens to hundreds of nearby farmers—sometimes all-white, sometimes all-black, and occasionally mixed—assembled at each rural rally in order to hear Yarborough’s fiery, increasingly populist rhetoric. Hall worked the crowds with index cards, collecting names and addresses and sending the information back to the campaign’s headquarters in Austin to be added to another three-ring binder database. As soon as the speech concluded, he sped off to the next town, where he would again consult his own binder, find a merchant with an outlet and a parking spot, and repeat the process. The process for organizing in urban areas was not substantially different: Hall arrived early, arranged meetings at union halls, churches, and civic clubs, frantically collected index cards, and sped off to the next locale.152

Hall recalled that Yarborough’s campaigns initially had no idea how to approach African Americans as potential supporters. Politics in the candidate’s hometown in East Texas remained a largely all-white affair, as it had been since the repression of the

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152 Robert E. “Bob” Hall, interview by author, May 18, 2010, Houston, Texas, 0:20, 8:55, 13:20-18:20, 1:06:30, 1:10:40. Hall worked full-time in the 1952 campaign, sat out the 1954 effort, and returned again full-time in 1956, when he served as Yarborough’s traveling itinerary manager. By the time of the third gubernatorial race, Hall had an offer from the Dixie & Shulman labor law firm of Houston, but he took leave to work full-time in electoral politics—an activity the partners strongly supported.
Populist Party near the turn of the Twentieth Century. The poll tax reigned supreme, making it exceedingly difficult to register and mobilize poor white voters, let alone blacks. The white primary formally excluded African Americans from state and local partisan politics until 1944. Less than a decade passed before Yarborough’s first campaign, and even the most liberal candidates still remained squarely focused on turning out the poor white vote. Jim Crow prohibited social interaction between blacks and whites, and political contacts were few and far between.

Hall remembers that the campaign typically found African American activist contacts by accident. In the cities Yarborough’s advance team contacted African American activists whom they knew through the labor movement and its law firms, some of which dated back to the Progressive Party ticket of 1948 or even the pecan sheller movement a decade earlier. Moses and Erma LeRoy were the campaign’s Houston contacts, and the couple arranged countless events for the candidate throughout the 1950s. In Dallas the Lamberts phone would ring, and through the Lamberts the campaign would reach the local NAACP and Progressive Voters League. By 1956, Pancho Medrano had become another reliable contact to reach out to Dallas’ ethnic Mexican and African American voters. In San Antonio Maury Maverick and then his son helped Yarborough find platforms on the West and East sides, though the liberals there did not always deliver the endorsements from across town (see chapter 3). Hall remembered that the activists they found were not always the right leaders; that is, they were not
necessarily the people who had the most influence in the black and brown communities. But they were the people that the white liberals knew, and that was a start. 

Meanwhile, in rural districts in East Texas, African Americans found their own way to join the campaign’s list of local grass-roots organizers. One campaign staffer remembered an episode that repeated itself many times throughout Yarborough’s early campaigns. At a mixed-race rally in East Texas, after Yarborough railed against economic elites and the Shivercrats, and after all the whooping and hollering ended, and when the crowd finally dispersed, an older black man stood up from his perch in the back of the room and slowly approached the staffers. Following the racial etiquette of the day, the man looked down at the floor in deference and quietly thanked the out-of-town whites for their appearance in his hamlet and their support on the issues. Finally, the man looked up and asked, “Do y’all know Dave Shapiro?” The question, innocently posed, explicitly referred to a longtime liberal activist and attorney based in Austin, where Yarborough also lived and worked. But the implicit meaning was different. Shapiro had family ties to the Populist movement of the 1880s and 1890s, an inter-racial revolt that represented the last best hope of black political aspiration prior to the advent of Jim Crow by white supremacist Democrats. The old man of 1952, Hall explained in 2010, was himself old enough to have witnessed the Populist movement, and his father and elders were themselves key activists in the black wing of the uprising. To ask about Dave

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153 Hall, first interview by author, May 18, 2010, 27:50, 33:15, 46:25, 58:15-1:03:00. Hall added that the LeRoys were an example of good diplomats who depended upon segregation to maintain their status as intermediaries between blacks and whites. He was unaware of their history in radical politics as well as the internal political debates within the HCCO and Houston’s black communities. Still, this became his perception by the mid-1960s.
Shapiro meant to ask about the bloody days at the end of that struggle. He was really asking, “Which side were y’all on?” Or perhaps, “Do you really believe in organizing a black political constituency?” And maybe even, “Are you willing to take that risk with us?” Hall understood the question’s true meaning and answered in the affirmative. He recorded the old man’s name on an index card and sent the information to be included in the campaign’s three-ring binders. And the next time they came to town they contacted the old man and held a meeting on the other side of the tracks, with the sons and daughters of black Populists who were again willing to stick out their necks for the rare white politician who gave a damn about them.154

While countless poor whites and a growing number of blacks rallied around Yarborough, the candidate’s own record on race and civil rights at times created suspicion among African Americans. He tried to walk a tightrope that allowed him to maintain black and liberal support but did not offend the racist sensibilities of some of his white farmer and labor backers. He also grappled with his own East Texas roots and unconsciously white supremacist sentiments. Following the Brown decision of 1954, he stated that he opposed “forced integration” of the schools but believed in equality and voluntary reconciliation of the races. He joined Southern Dixiecrats in denouncing Eisenhower during the Little Rock school integration stand-off of 1957. And he slipped into his East Texas vernacular, an idiom that blamed African Americans for the region’s economic woes. Hall recalls one rally in 1956 at which Yarborough became especially passionate while rhetorically laying into the banks, insurance companies, and oil giants

who enriched themselves at the expense of ordinary working Texans. While a mixed-race crowd looked on, Yarborough screamed at the elites who lied to and stole from the poor, finally exclaiming, “But you and I know that there’s a nigger somewhere in that woodpile!” Hall remembers being immediately crushed. All of his work to cross the tracks and the color line hung in the balance with every one of the candidate’s public pronouncements, and statements like this one set that part of the campaign back months if not years. The relationship between the campaign and black activists was fundamentally “dishonest” and “hypocritical,” Hall later recalled. The candidate and staffers talked out of both sides of their mouths, while many African American activists lacked the influence they claimed or double-crossed Yarborough on election day.155

Yarborough lost in the Democratic primary run-off in 1952 and again in 1954 and again in 1956. Huge numbers of African Americans and many ethnic Mexicans continued to support him, as did poor whites—especially in rural areas. Hall and many observers believe that incumbent Allan Shivers stole the 1954 race by mobilizing the political machines near his family ranch in the Valley (while simultaneously denouncing bossism in the case of George Parr, who opposed him in Duval County) and perhaps stuffing urban boxes as well. Shivers simultaneously declared war on the CIO, using a strike in Port Arthur as a launching pad for a broad anti-communist attack on nearly all of

155 Hall, first interview by author, May 18, 2010, 47:20-52:55; Brian Spinks, “Yarborough Expands Views on Segregation,” Houston Post, July 18, 1954, clipping; R. R. Grovey, “Negro Leader Tells Why He’s For Shivers,” clipping dated July 21, 1954, probably Houston Informer—both in Christia V. Adair Collection, MSS 109, Box 1, Folder 2, HMRC. Hall contradictorily recalls that Yarborough directed this comment against Gordon McClendon, who opposed him in the 1964 U. S. Senate primary. But the rest of Hall’s story establishes the place and date as the North side of Houston in 1956, a location and time that makes more sense with the rest of his narrative. Hall adds that he asked reporters at the rally to refrain from printing Ralph’s racist comment. No paper trail exists.
Yarborough’s supporters. The governor claimed that Yarborough supported integration and was in bed with the communists and labor goons. Still, according to Hall and others, Yarborough should have won. In 1956, Yarborough again lost in the run-off, this time to Shivers’ hand-picked successor, outgoing U. S. Senator Price Daniel. The 1956 campaign again featured race-baiting tactics, though they were, according to one historian, “not as vitriolic” as they had been in 1954. Again, according to Hall and many others, Yarborough would have won a fair and free election. Clearly, the mass mobilization of corporate conservative interests contributed more to Yarborough’s defeat than did any sense of “dishonesty” among his diverse constituency.\footnote{Hall, first interview by author, May 18, 2010, 19:45; Robert E. “Bob” Hall, interview by author, May 31, 2010, Houston, Texas. Cox, ch. 6-7, esp. pp. 134-135 (vitiolic quotation on 136). On the so-called “Port Arthur story,” also see the feature articles in the \textit{Texas Observer}, December 13 and 20, 1954, and Fred Schmidt, “The ’Port Arthur Story,’” \textit{Texas State AFL-CIO News}, October 1960, 4.}

Despite suffering increasingly narrow defeats, Yarborough’s campaigns still inspired white liberals to organize anew, while simultaneously activating or creating multiracial political networks. The white liberal Democrats found a standard-bearer for their cause and developed a way to stay organized in between election years. Soon after Shivers’ defeat of both Yarborough and presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson in 1952, liberals in Houston came together and founded the Harris County Democrats (HCD). The group formally organized in 1953, adopting a constitution and electing attorney J. Edwin Smith as its first chairman. An official history holds that “This organization was integration from the beginning” and “had an open-door policy from inception,” but only a handful of African Americans or ethnic Mexicans were intimately involved. Moses and
Erma LeRoy were likely involved from its inception, as was NAACP Executive Director Christia Adair, who later served on the HCD staff.\(^{157}\)

In general, wealthy and middle-class white liberals, labor lawyers, and a few white labor members filled the HCD’s ranks. Mrs. R. D. (Frankie Carter) Randolph quickly became the group’s chief benefactor and lead organizer. Born in 1894, she came from a wealthy East Texas lumber producing family and in 1918 married a naval corps pilot who later became a prominent Houston banker. Still, her Bourbon origins and bourgeois lifestyle eventually succumbed to her lived experience, as she got involved in a variety of volunteer social programs during the Great Depression. She became a supporter of President Roosevelt, joined the League of Women Voters, and advocated for public housing and flood control projects in poor areas.\(^ {158}\) In 1954, she emerged as a leading activist in the HCD, spearheading the organization of precinct clubs across Harris County, which in turn led the liberal group to win control of the county Executive Committee “for the first time.” Their dominance of a large, urban county did not, however, translate into power in the state Democratic Party, and conservative Governor Allan Shivers easily “isolated and insulted” them at the state convention that year.

\(^{157}\) “The History of the Harris County Democrats,” no author, no date [1967], Adair Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, HMRC. Adair also served as the judge for precinct 25. Interview with Christia Adair, interviewed by Dorothy R. Robinson, *Black Women Oral History Project*, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, copy in Adair Collection, Box 4, Folder 2, iii-iv, 21; Form letter from Mrs. R. D. Randolph, April 12, 1957; letter from H. T. Taylor to C. V. Adair, May 4, 1957—both in Adair Collection, Box 4, Folder 9.

\(^{158}\) “History of the Harris County Democrats,” [1967], Adair Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, HMRC, 1; Ronnie Dugger, “Randolph, Frankie Carter,” *Handbook of Texas Online* (http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fra34), accessed May 08, 2011.
Yarborough’s opposition campaign inspired the HCD activists, even as it fell short overall.\textsuperscript{159}

The next two years were periods of “intensified organization” in which the HCD built upon their initial local success to lay a foundation for long-term coalition-building and power and the statewide level. In 1955, the group’s steering committee grew to “more than 500 policy makers.” The HCD imagined itself as an alternative to the closed-door cliques that dominated conservative political organizing, contending that the people could be better represented through transparent debate than by the special interests led by developer Herman Brown who assembled in Suite 3F of the Baker Hotel downtown. “Always opponents of the ‘smoke-filed room,’” its historian later wrote, the “Harris County Democrats had to start using an auditorium for its meetings.”

In May, 1956, one of these open, integrated meetings became the site for an early attempt to build a multiracial liberal alliance. As it was later described: “The first candidates interviewing committee was formed with members from the Harris County Democrats, AFL-CIO, and [the Harris County] Council of Organizations. (This later became the coalition.)” In addition to endorsing liberal candidates, the outreach effort helped the HCD again carry the county convention. At the first state convention in June of that year, the group elected its Executive Secretary, Frankie Carter Randolph, to the post of Democratic National Committeewoman. For the first time since the Depression, liberal Texans gained a seat at the state party’s table and also had a voice in national

\textsuperscript{159}“History of the Harris County Democrats,” [1967], Adair Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, HMRC, 1; “Harris Democrats Back Party Ticket,” unknown newspaper clipping dated 1954, Adair Collection, Box 1, Folder 2.
politics. Building upon their momentum, Yarborough carried Harris County but narrowly lost the gubernatorial run-off to sitting U. S. Senator Price Daniel.\(^\text{160}\)

Still, the HCD and liberal Democrats across Texas remained marginalized in the state Democratic Party. At the second state convention (held only in presidential election years) in Fort Worth in September, 1956, Shivers and Daniel again outmaneuvered the liberals. They flatly refused to seat the HCD members, opting instead for a conservative challenge delegation. Doing so allowed the conservatives to easily dominate the proceedings. The credentials move likely violated the party’s by-laws, and the liberals did not retreat until physically threatened. The group’s official history adds:

AND WORST OF ALL, Mrs. Randolph and hundreds of other loyal Harris County Democrats, after being chosen delegates by a virtual landslide, had to sit in the “cow-barn” at the September convention. Convention management, backed up by armed possemen [sic], unseated the legal, loyal delegation and gave our seats to conservatives.\(^\text{161}\)

The HCD members, joined by liberals and some labor delegates from San Antonio and Dallas—including George and Latane Lambert—formed their own rump convention in protest. Following the meeting’s conclusion, in December, they formalized their caucus into a statewide permanent organization, the Democrats of Texas (DOT), which now completely replaced the old Texas Legislative and Social Conference.\(^\text{162}\)

Led by Mrs. Randolph, DOT essentially expanded the HCD into a statewide group. Throughout the late 1950s and into 1960, it provided the glue that tied Democratic activists together between conventions and campaigns. Like the HCD, it

\(^{160}\) “History of the Harris County Democrats,” [1967], Adair Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, HMRC, 1.

\(^{161}\) Ibid.

\(^{162}\) “Let’s Compare the Records...” flyer comparing DOT and SDEC, Adair Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, HMRC.
remained a predominately white group, led by labor lawyers and a few wealthy “independent” liberals like Mrs. Randolph. Yet it also included numerous labor activists like the Lamberts and a handful of African American and ethnic Mexican activists—most of whom were union members like Moses LeRoy. Paired with the founding of the Texas Observer in 1954 (which Mrs. Randolph also endowed), it represented an institutional home from which liberal Democrats could continue to organize, maintain cohesion between elections, and continue forming deeper interracial ties.

In 1957, Yarborough finally won an election. Price Daniel’s victory over the perennial liberal candidate in 1956 forced to Daniel to vacate his U. S. Senate seat, and Shivers appointed a conservative businessman with no plans to hold the position long-term as Daniel’s temporary replacement. The state constitution required a speedy special election that would not require either a simple majority or a run-off to fill the vacated seat. Lyndon Johnson, the other U. S. Senator from Texas, led an effort in the state legislature to change the election code in order to prevent Yarborough from slipping into office, but his maneuver failed. The lack of a powerful incumbent created a wide-open, statewide race. Yarborough, in the words of his biographer, “was in the fifth year of nearly nonstop statewide campaign, so the people of Texas knew him well.” Anti-communist arch-conservative Martin Dies emerged as his main opposition, but he was too reactionary to win the support of Johnson, Daniel, or Shivers. So Yarborough’s well-tested campaign staffers whipped out their well-worn three-ring binders and began contacting their tens if not hundreds of thousands of supporters. Finally, after a massive liberal get-out-the-vote mobilization, Yarborough carried a plurality of 38%, defeating
Dies by a wide margin and ascending to the U. S. Senate. He easily won re-election to a full six year term in 1958.\textsuperscript{163}

The liberal standard-bearer finally had an office from which to operate and a position that he could use to repay his longtime supporters. He became “the People’s Senator,” opening his office to liberal, labor, and civil rights activists and serving as a dignitary and speaker at countless community organizing events. He served as resource for organizers and an advocate for their associations. His victory did not bring immediate liberal change to Texas, but it did provide long time activists with some degree of hope.

\textbf{Conclusion: Labor at a Crossroads}

Yarborough’s victory gave organized labor and working people of all races a powerful ally in Washington and its local struggles across Texas. Yet it remained unclear if the Senator’s newfound power would benefit all of the state’s ordinary folks or if it would remain limited to his core constituencies of small farmers, white liberals, and organized craftsmen and industrial workers. Was Yarborough’s victory a mistake, a mere blip on the radar, or was it the harbinger of things to come, the first sign of a burgeoning liberal movement in Texas? How would the Senator and Texas liberalism confront the growing national and local debates over black civil rights?

Nobody in 1957 knew the answers to these questions, and most were probably unaware that they stood at a critical, historical crossroads. Yet less than four months after Yarborough’s election, one group of his key supporters discussed the meaning of their movement and, in so doing, inadvertently addressed the key issue of the next decade

\textsuperscript{163} Cite Cox, chap. 8 (quotation on 142-143); Hall interview.
head-on. Members of the Texas State Federation of Labor and the Texas State CIO Council came together in late July and early August, 1957, to found a new, merged organization, the Texas State AFL-CIO. The diverse group of workers who assembled in Austin conducted three days of business, but the report of the newly-formed ad hoc Civil Rights Committee produced an intense, emotional debate that was anything but routine.

In fact, the discussion of whether organized labor should commit itself to the struggle for civil rights dominated the convention’s proceedings, providing a snapshot of ordinary Texans’ attitudes and likely political persuasions. A brief look at several representative voices in the debate reveals both the limits and possibilities of Texas labor as a vehicle for social change.

The committee’s chairman was a man named Jim Pierce, a white delegate probably from an old CIO union. Pierce offered the committee’s report, which amounted to an extremely strong resolution in support of the civil rights cause. The report begins by quoting the Declaration of Independence and offering a (probably exaggerated) statement that “we of the AFL-CIO are proud of the fight we have waged to give to give all Americans, regardless of race, color, sex, creed or national origin the fullest degree of liberty and human dignity. Long have we been in the forefront in the battles to secure these democratic rights...” It noted that the constitution of the merged Texas State AFL-CIO included a commitment to “all workers...to share equally in the full benefits of union organization” and “to protect and strengthen our democratic institutions” by fighting for full civil rights of all members. “We apologize to no one for these provisions of our Constitution,” the report adds. Pierce continued to read that the committee commended
the efforts allied organizations outside of organized labor “who have so courageously entered the battle for civil rights.”

Then he kicked it up a notch, directly addressing the burning civil rights issue of the day. The committee lauded the “more than 100 local school districts that are now in their third year of compliance with the ruling of the Supreme Court” and the “more than 300,000 school children who are now studying in integrated schools without one single serious incident...” The Texas State AFL-CIO “wholeheartedly supports the decisions of the Supreme Court outlawing segregation” and calls upon local school boards to immediately implement integration and upon the state’s Attorney General to test the constitutionality of the recently-passed state laws designed to avoid integration. At the same time, the report attacked the “recent rise of so-called ‘Citizens Councils’ and other Ku Klux Klan type organizations in the state of Texas,” adding that “We recognize them for what they are...” The committee recommended that the Texas State AFL-CIO and affiliates “give every possible assistance and support to those organizations and community forces seeking to combat the program of ‘hate’ organizations.” Unions should also “take steps to provide equal job opportunities” to all and the state body “should use every means available to insure no discrimination within the locals themselves...” Finally, the committee “declares strong support for an effective and enforceable fair employment practices act and urges the enactment of such legislation by
the Texas State Legislature.” Pierce and another committee member moved the immediate approval of the report that will create “a firm policy” for the organization.¹⁶⁴

Most white delegates responded to the report with their own, milder version of massive resistance. One immediately offered a motion to table the resolution, while another attempted to quickly call the question and end future debate. Others claimed that the report went too far, or was impractical, or that was beyond the federation’s purview, or that it would lead to disunity in their locals’ ranks. Yet enough delegates supported the debate that the attempt to call the question failed, and a robust conversation ensued.

Unlike most issues in which white voices dominated the conversation, on this point the convention’s few African American delegates made sure that their opinions were heard. The delegates from Houston’s Hod Carriers and Common Laborers Local #18 gave impassioned pleas in support of the civil rights committee’s report. Freeman Everett was in attendance, but a new officer named C. E. Gauthier took the lead in presenting their case. Gauthier made a patriotic argument, strategically calling out the convention’s delegates for their inaction and hypocrisy while making the issues clear:

I am speaking in opposition to the motion to postpone. We all say we are American citizens and we glory in our country, we brag about what we are and about what we can do, and when it comes down to the fact we try to evade the issue. What good will it do to postpone this thing next year? You will have the same fight on your hands. Why not let’s be men and women and settle this thing? Let’s stand up and be counted. And I would appreciate if I am in order to call for a roll call vote on this thing where everybody can show their true colors.

I am tired of everybody patting me on the back and telling me that they are my friends and then cutting my throat behind my back. By golly, I am a

¹⁶⁴ Proceedings of the founding convention of the Texas State AFL-CIO, Austin, July 30-August 1, 1957, TLA-UTA, 139-140.
citizen here. I pay taxes. I raise my children, raising grandchildren now, and I don’t want to feel that I am not safe here. This would be some of the best propaganda that Russia could use, if we go down here in defeat, this civil rights program that we have here. You fellows tell us that we are the best country in the world. Prove it to us. Don’t just tell me something. Prove it to me by giving me my rights and privileges that I’m justly entitled to.

I’m not so hot on social equality, but economic equality, wage equality, a number of things that we black people want and we are going to have them if we have to fight for them. We want you people to know that. And I’m not afraid to die. If I can go and fight and stand a chance of losing my life, and my friend’s life, across the water fighting for you, I can lose it right here fighting for myself...  

Other members of Local #18 and the few other all-black unions in attendance gave similar speeches in support of the Civil Rights Committee’s report, reinforcing the same themes. It was not about “social equality” or miscegenation, they reminded the delegates. It was about rights and justice, about solidarity beyond the shop floor. Arthur J. Guidry, a delegate from the black Longshoremen’s Local #4-254 in Port Arthur, added that it wasn’t good enough to have “secondary high school teachers who are paid second class salaries,” nor to be able to “buy first class homes in fourth class sections and pay first class taxes to furnish building that we are not allowed to enter.” Like Gauthier, he called out his white union brothers, especially those who “have patted me on the back and have said that I am with you” only to abandon him in his time of need. “What kind of leaders do we have in these unions?” he asked.  

White women and ethnic Mexican men likewise supported the committee’s report. Delegate Faye Blessing, of the Communications Workers of America Local

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165 Ibid, 145.
#6132 in Austin, noted that the resolution should be considered beyond the black and white issue and instead delegates should also think about discrimination based on color, creed, and sex. “...We were reminded this week [that] we would face very important issues...This is the time to think wisely and act,” she began. The issue hit home for Blessing, who argued from experience that all union members would eventually gain a stake in each other’s rights and equality:

We in the Communications Workers are faced with automation. For years we weren’t able to get the sympathy of the male members of our organization to be able to push forward. Now they are beginning to realize that with automation they are bringing in female employees and paying them at a much, much lower rate of pay than they are male employees, thereby eliminating jobs for the male employees. Now we are beginning to get the backing of the male employees of our membership. They are beginning to realize that there are problems that we are going to have to face regardless of whether or not we like them. That’s the situation we are in today. And we will not be able to solve any of these problems if we do not take a definite stand.167

Paul Montemayor, an ethnic Mexican delegate and staffer for the United Steelworkers Local #5022 in Corpus Christi, added that he supported the resolution and that he wanted to see an immediate vote in order to gauge “how much work we still have to do” with the majority of the labor movement’s white delegates. “Being a member of a minority group,” he added, “I know that this state and the free working people of the world will see and feel the actions that we here take today. Mr. Chairman, I do not want to delay this any longer.”168

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167 Ibid, 156
168 Ibid, 156. Pancho Medrano was also a delegate to this convention and a member of its “Latin American Affairs Committee.” He did not speak during the debate on civil rights.
A substitute motion offered by a white delegate replaced the locally-produced resolution with a new statement offering the state federation’s support for the official civil rights platform of the national AFL-CIO. If anything, the language was stronger, and the convention’s black delegates did not dissent from its passage in lieu of the original state report (the final tally was 301 to 151 in support of the amendment). The final resolution then passed by a simple, likely unanimous voice vote. Although it was not a watered down version of the original proposal, the final motion represented a compromise that gave white delegates some cover when they returned home. Rather than having to justify their explicit roll call vote for or against school integration and a fair employment law in Texas, they could merely inform their memberships that they agreed to go along with national AFL-CIO policy, merely assenting to a voice vote. Perhaps, like the Southern governors who desired state’s rights and massive resistance, the white workers who opposed the original civil rights resolution could now simply blame federal intrusion for forcing them to accept the national platform under duress. They ultimately did not have to stand up and be counted, for or against, as the black delegates and Montemayor had proposed.

The convention thus went on record that organized labor would support civil rights. By itself, the resolution would not produce action. Yet its passage created space for civil rights activists within organized labor. The few African American, ethnic Mexican, and white women workers who shared their views offer a glimpse into the economic desperation and democratic aspirations that continued to circulate in their respective communities. Their words, marginalized at the time and long since forgotten,
make the separate black and brown worlds across the tracks that Yarborough’s staffers had struggled to reach more recognizable, helping to explain the mass mobilizations that seemingly burst on the scene in the 1960s. The debate surrounding the civil rights resolution alerted white workers to the hopes and dreams of their nonwhite counterparts, and it committed the Texas State AFL-CIO to joining their struggle. The federation would not do so in a meaningful way for four more years, but faced with a symbolic crossroads, organized labor chose a direction that allowed for future coalition organizing efforts in collaboration with the black and brown civil rights movements. They still needed a model for what such cooperation would look like. San Antonio offered just that.
Chapter 3 – The San Antonio Model

Introduction

While conservative forces in Houston used an anti-communist toolkit to attack and discredit civil rights unionism, and Dallas elites remained largely aloof to the potential threat of labor and liberal organizing, their counterparts in San Antonio enjoyed near-complete dominance of the local political scene. After the defeat of the pecan sheller movement and Maury Maverick’s electoral coalition, the Alamo City fathers had returned to business as usual. They shored up their power by spreading limited patronage to the black and brown neighborhoods and working through hand-picked intermediaries to fend off possible dissidents.

Yet throughout the long 1950s, they never enjoyed the absolute power that has been assumed by contemporaries and historians alike. Rather, behind the scenes and largely beyond the gaze of the city’s leading businessmen and politicians, San Antonio became the incubator of the state’s first enduring multiracial civil rights coalition. It had its origins in part in the massive influx of migrants and capital during the military buildup of World War II, a trend that continued as the bases remained open throughout the Cold War. Veterans among the new arrivals mixed with hometown descendents of the old Maverick campaigns to launch a new wave of organizing efforts. On the city’s Eastside, African American activists put forward an expansive vision for an all-out assault on Jim Crow, staging a broad campaign for both racial and economic justice. These organically radical activists encountered opposition from their own so-called race leaders, but they found new ways to publicize their activities and communicate with residents in their
community and possible allies across the city. At the same time, a growing civil rights movement and liberal political mobilization among ethnic Mexicans on the Westside likewise challenged the intermediaries that had long dominated the city’s barrios. And a series of strikes near the end of the decade reenergized the city’s historically small and predominately-white labor movement.

Intermittent partnership between like-minded black, brown, and white activists slowly and unsteadily progressed toward lasting relationships of trust and mutual need and support. Differences did not disappear, and a full-fledged, permanent coalition would not emerge until at least 1960. Yet the experiments in San Antonio in the fifteen years after World War II laid a foundation for future collaboration across the color line. Black, brown, and white activists searched for and discovered ways to work together that together comprised a model for future cooperative efforts at both the local and statewide levels.

**Action and Reaction**

In 1948, just as the Progressive Party in Houston burst onto the scene and then plummeted to a crushing defeat, activists in San Antonio developed a less confrontational and ultimately more effective electoral strategy. G. J. Sutton, the college-educated undertaker who had unprecedentedly organized black voters in support of the pecan shellers and Maury Maverick’s campaigns in the late 1930s, re-emerged as the voice of an increasingly independent and impatient African American community. He did so thanks to a quiet alliance with Gustavo C. “Gus” Garcia, the unpredictable but brilliant
Mexican American attorney who led the legal teams for LULAC and the brand-new American G.I. Forum in Texas.

Earlier that year, Sutton and Garcia came together and agreed to support one another’s electoral aspirations. Sutton sought a position on the San Antonio Junior College Board, the body that was responsible for administering the city’s two segregated public schools of higher education. The black school, St. Philips College, had long been the pride of the Eastside, and Sutton’s father had long served as its principal. But after World War II, which raised the expectations of many African Americans in San Antonio and across the nation, it remained clear that St. Philips would continue to get the short end of the stick when it came to resources for the college’s development. Like its primary and secondary school counterparts in the age of Jim Crow, St. Philips received less public funding per pupil, lower salaries for its faculty and staff, and used textbooks and instructional tools only after they had been discarded from the white junior college. Sutton’s candidacy promised to reverse or at least ameliorate these trends, demanding a fair share of resources for St. Philips within the confines of the “separate but equal” system of segregation. In the era before Brown v. Board (1954), this was not simply the best that blacks could do or hope for. Rather, Sutton’s candidacy called for equality under the law and, even more radically, a voice at the governing table. Such demands were so outlandish that they were summarily dismissed by white observers without much need for comment.¹

¹ On St Philips, see Kenneth Mason, “Paternal continuity: African Americans and race relations in San Antonio, Texas, 1867-1937” (Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin, 1994), chap. 5. On AFAM education
For his part, attorney Garcia sought a seat on the board of the San Antonio Independent School District. His race grew out of the School Improvement League (La Liga Pro Defensor Escolar), a group founded and led by LULACer and businessman Eleuterio Escobar. Garcia’s campaign was one wing of the League’s larger campaign to both improve the city’s “Mexican schools” and to desegregate Anglo schools. According to historian Mario T. Garcia, the League had tried every weapon in its arsenal in order to apply pressure on the school board, but the body’s continued inaction required that the group field its own candidate.\(^2\) Gus Garcia had led the legal effort to close down a segregated “Mexican school” in nearby Cuero, and he was now preparing a broader Constitutional challenge of the entire practice of segregating of ethnic Mexican and “Anglo” children.\(^3\)

Little evidence survives of how exactly Sutton and Garcia came together, but both the electoral returns and posthumous accounts suggest that each candidate actively campaigned for the other. Both Sutton and Garcia won their respective races, backed by thousands of independent African American Eastside and ethnic Mexican Westside voters. Each supported the others’ candidates.

The two candidates’ victories may have caught many white observers unaware, but the central importance of their coalition strategy was immediately apparent to contemporary journalists. “Minorities Combine,” blared the headline of the *San Antonio*

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Light on the day after the election. Sutton became the first black elected official in Bexar County or South Texas since Reconstruction. Garcia brought the most militant of Mexican American activists into the halls of power for the first time.  

Later that year, Garcia filed and successfully argued the case that made segregation of ethnic Mexicans illegal in Texas, *Delgado v. Bastrop ISD* (1948). The case did not challenge the segregation of African Americans. But in 1950 Garcia joined local School Improvement League and NAACP leaders in demanding that a planned $9.3 million school bond referendum include an earmark provision that would guarantee roughly one-third of the funds for black and Westside (ethnic Mexican) schools. The provision never made it on the ballot, but the bond passed, and Garcia successfully directed the funding toward the city’s black and brown neighborhoods.

The 1948 election signaled the return of independent African American and ethnic Mexican voters to the San Antonio political scene. It marked the re-creation of a multiracial coalition, but it also alerted white elites to the possibility of a sustained assault on Jim Crow.

San Antonio’s conservative city fathers responded to the election by reorganizing their system of governance in order to ensure the ongoing exclusion of black, brown, and white liberals. Like their counterparts across the Southwest, white businessmen in San Antonio launched a campaign for municipal “reform.” They lambasted bossism and

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ward politics, both of which they had championed for decades. With the machine now under fire at the polls and discredited in the business community, they turned to advocating efficient, corporate-style government. District elections would be entirely supplanted by at-large elections, which they argued would guarantee that politicians put the interest of the city as a whole ahead of any parochial neighborhood concerns. Of course, the intended practical consequence of this structural change was to guarantee that only white candidates could win election. The elections would remain nonpartisan, a holdover from the earlier system that effectively kept precinct organizations out of city politics. A new system of management and governance would accompany the new electoral procedures. Reformers promised the installation of a city manager system in which elected members of the city council were to be removed from daily supervision of municipal affairs. The mayor would henceforth serve as a figurehead and chairman of the council, but the city manager would hire department heads who in turn would professionalize the entire civil service. All of the changes would produce endless growth, including both economic development and geographical expansion of the city’s boundaries. The rising tide, they promised, would lift all boats.

The reformers triumphed, changing the city charter to create the new system in the municipal elections of 1951. It experienced some growing pains as the first weak mayor battled the city manager for control, so members of the Chamber of Commerce sought to solidify their grasp. In 1954, sixty Chamber members assembled to form the Good Government League (GGL), a non-partisan group that would preempt such bickering by selecting a slate of pre-screened candidates for all future municipal
elections. The GGL grew to 3,000 members by the time of the 1955 elections, thereby incorporating all potential enemies and guaranteeing that debate would take place only behind closed doors prior to the nomination of reform-friendly, consensus candidates.6

For the next decade, the GGL was unbeatable at the polls, tallying an unblemished 53-0 record. Activists like G. J. Sutton, Gus Garcia, and Maury Maverick had no power in such settings, and they probably would not have attended the meetings of the GGL even if they had been invited. Valmo Bellinger, the African American community leader and son of the former black political boss, gained entrée to the GGL but had few spoils to show for his support. Likewise, a group of elite Mexican Americans formed the “Westside GGL” and actively supported the white elites’ efforts. They were rewarded with a few council positions as long as they continued to subordinate their demands to the elites’ vision of economic growth and political domination. Sutton and Garcia served out their terms through 1952, but neither would be re-elected. The elites had reestablished control.7

**Back to Work: Organizing the Eastside**

Black and brown civil rights activists continued to organize in their communities, even as the political winds shifted against them. On the African American Eastside, Sutton soon found new allies in a pair of kindred spirits, the Reverend Claude Black, Jr.,

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7 Rosales, *The Illusion of Inclusion*, 50, citing John Rodgers in *The Texas Observer*. The one exception to complete elite dominance at the polls is HBG, who first won a seat on the council in 1953, before the GGL was founded. Palmer, *Living as Equals*, 172.
and photographer and publisher Eugene Coleman. Together, the trio put forward an expansive vision of social change that challenged the political and economic foundations of Jim Crow. As Bellinger and other African American community leaders returned to the patronage politics of old, Sutton and the more militant activists demanded full integration, independent political power, and economic opportunities and community development. Their expansive vision harkened back to the old coalitions of the 1930s and 40s and laid the groundwork for new, unprecedentedly powerful inter-ethnic alliances by the end of the 1950s.

Rev. Black was a San Antonio native, born in 1916 in the family home and raised on the Eastside. His father worked the Pullman lines and joined A. Philip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters back when doing so could result in termination of employment or physical violence if discovered by the company. Claude Black Sr. served as a shop steward and steadily climbed the ranks of the union, eventually becoming a local vice-president. His salary was small, but he made more in tips than virtually all black workers. Riding the rails was a good job that helped the family buy a small house, but it also kept the elder Black away from his home and family for long stretches of time. The younger Black slept on a covered back porch and worked for his uncle’s ice company as his mother pinched pennies and took in boarders to maintain the household. Somehow the parents still squirreled away enough of the father’s tips to create a small college fund for the son.8

Claude Jr.’s political education began when he was a child. Randolph visited the family when he passed through San Antonio, and years later Black still remembered his father and the union president frequently discussing race relations and civil rights late into the night. “I remember being drawn into those discussions like a moth to a flame,” he later remembered. “I would not say anything, because they were adult conversations. Nevertheless, I was amazed that these men had the guts to stand up for their rights.”

Randolph, he later recalled perhaps hyperbolically, was his “mentor and idol.” Like others before him, Black Jr. joined the youth chapter of the NAACP led by Ms. Euretta Fairchild. Their campaign centered on basic community improvements, beginning with a demand that the city install fire hydrants in the Eastside. “Even though our homes were burning down, it would take us many years of protesting and petitioning to finally receive them,” Black later recalled.

It is unclear when exactly Black befriended G. J. Sutton, but their life histories likely overlapped as early as the 1930s. G. J., born in 1909, was several years older than Black, but a few of his fifteen siblings were near Black’s age. Both future leaders participated in the local NAACP youth chapter, and Black attended Douglas Junior High School, of which G. J.’s father Samuel J. Sutton was principal. Black later commented that the “Sutton family was like royalty in our community. They were our example of

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11 *Ibid.* , 19; Black interview by author.
G. J. was probably in Ohio in college when Black graduated from Douglas after the eleventh grade in 1933.

Black Sr.’s tips allowed the junior Black to seek higher education, a privilege that eluded the vast majority of African Americans. Still, his options were limited. He briefly attended St. Philips College on the Eastside before transferring to Samuel Huston College, an all-black private school in Austin. He pledged Omega Psi Phi and became “an Omega man,” but he found the academics of the former freedman’s institute lacking. Black transferred again in 1935, this time to one of America’s best black colleges, Morehouse in Atlanta. Morehouse men took great pride in their schooling, he later recalled, and they competed with one another as each sought “to make a name for himself in the world.” Yet they did so in a rigidly segregated world, a place where Jim Crow was even stronger than it was in Texas.

Several years later the future Reverend Black discovered his calling while selling life insurance in rural East Texas. Traveling door-to-door among poor sharecroppers and tenant farmers had a profound effect on Black, who marveled that many of his customers were happy despite their poverty. Their worldly salvation—and his—was found in the church. Black enrolled at Andover Newton Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, where he earned a master’s degree and became an ordained Baptist minister. He returned home to San Antonio in 1943 with a new sense of purpose, and he began preaching in a “soul saving ministry” at the Eastside’s Cameo Theatre. He hoped to “reach the

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unapproachable,” mostly poor folks who did not attend church regularly. Soon after, he also helped a group of church women form the San Antonio Mother’s Service Organization.

In 1946, Black moved to Corpus Christi to pastor St. Matthew’s Baptist Church. There he developed his ministerial strategy, a praxis that centered on closely connecting the church to social and political action in the community. Black circulated petitions and gathered signatures for a campaign to replace an old, unsafe bridge near the church—a key infrastructure improvement in the coastal areas near the Gulf. It took time, but the city eventually made the repairs. On another occasion, Black’s father helped him secure A. Philip Randolph as the church’s annual Men’s Day speaker. At the time the union leader was “advocating that African Americans boycott joining the military until the president [Truman] agreed to integrate it,” Black later remembered. The local papers reported on the church’s sponsorship of such an incendiary speaker, but no reprisals against Black or the church were forthcoming.

In 1949 Rev. Black again returned home, this time permanently. He became the minister of what was then known simply as First Baptist Church, a massive 1,500 member congregation in the heart of San Antonio’s Eastside. Social and political action again became central to his work, and he started various service programs that connected the church to the everyday needs of community residents. The first was Project Free, an initiative that provided meals and daycare to needy seniors and people with disabilities.

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14 Ibid, 29-36 (both quotations on 35).
16 Black and Matthews, Grandpa Was a Preacher, 65-66 (quotation on 66).
It eventually spawned Mount Zion Sheltering Arms, a safe and affordable assisted living apartment complex for seniors. The crown jewel of the church’s social service efforts was an innovative daycare program. Black later remembered that it solved two problems: it provided working mothers with much-needed child care during the day while simultaneously offering preschool education to kids who otherwise would have started kindergarten at an academic disadvantage compared to their peers. Black appointed a board of directors composed primarily of lay leaders from the church, and after several years of work the daycare opened its doors in 1957.17

Rev. Black’s wife, the former Miss ZerNona Stewart, also connected the family to a wide range of service programs in the larger Eastside community. The couple met during World War II when ZerNona, a native of Oklahoma, came to San Antonio to direct the Colored USO housed at the Sycamore Street YWCA. A graduate of Emerson College in Boston, ZerNona left a teaching position at Langston University in Tulsa to aid black soldiers and their families during the war. She traveled across the Southwest and Midwest before landing in San Antonio. She was a decade older than Black, had been married twice before, and had a teenage son who lived with his grandmother while ZerNona traveled to support the family. She was not the typical debutante of the 1940s Eastside, but Black remembered that no other ladies “displayed the class that ZerNona did.” More importantly, ZerNona tested him both privately and publicly, calling upon him to speak at community events and demanding that he too commit himself to service.

“I’d never had that happen to me before,” he recalled. “Imagine, a woman challenging what a man had to say in those days?” After a long courtship, the couple married in 1946. ZerNona had already quit her position at the USO, and she later taught part-time at St. Philips College while taking on a wide range of community projects.18

The wartime boom had transformed nearly all aspects of San Antonio, and one consequence was an extreme housing shortage on the Eastside. Prior to their marriage, ZerNona had rented a large house from the founder of St. Philips College, and Rev. Black moved in right after their wedding. They sub-let half of the building to the Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Coleman.19 It may or may not have been the coincidence of landlord and tenant that first brought the Blacks and Colemans together, but in any case their relationship endured. For the next three decades, the two families joined the Suttons in a protracted effort to improve daily life and win independent political representation for the Eastside.

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Born in 1921 and raised thirty-five miles southeast of Dallas, Eugene Coleman attended Houston College for Negroes (now TSU) before being drafted into the Army Air Force in 1944. The service sent him to San Antonio, where he was stationed at Brooks Field. There, he later recalled, he “had problems.” Coleman was a noncommissioned officer, but base supervisors asked him to perform menial tasks simply because he was black. When he refused, as he often did, he gained a reputation as a trouble maker. After

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numerous disputes, Coleman ended up assigned to the base’s newspaper, the *Brooks Field Observer*. He had “a little schooling” in photography, and he was now allowed to use his training to take pictures of base training activities and social events. But he still chafed at his supervisor, a black officer who Coleman believed was too passive in accepting discrimination at the base. Wanting a way out, he took the admissions test to go to Tuskegee to become a pilot, but his high marks weren’t enough to overcome his alleged bad attitude. Finally he was transferred across town to Randolph Air Force Base, where he remained until his discharge in 1947.  

Despite his experiences of racial discrimination while in the service, Coleman decided to remain in San Antonio after his discharge. He quickly married, moved in with the Blacks, and soon went to work opening his own photography business. While still in the service, Coleman had developed a new process that allowed him to develop film and make prints in about a half-hour, and he now put this faster method to use as part of his business. Rather than wait for customers to come to him, he attended dances and social events at various nightclubs, took snapshots of revelers, and developed pictures of them with the slogan of “while you wait.” At the same time, he built a portrait studio at St. Paul Square on the edge of the Eastside, where he soon attracted a loyal following among San Antonio’s African American residents.

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20 Coleman interview by author, file 1, 0:30-11:10. Coleman adds that he also organized a noncommissioned officers club at Brooks, a fact that protected him from official reprisals or dismissal.  
21 Coleman interview by author, file 1, 18:30-23:15. He hoped to get a small business loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a federal government agency designed to help the country transition from war manufacturing to a peacetime economy. Coleman believed his veteran status would help him qualify for assistance, but such aid was not forthcoming. It is unclear whether his business plan or his race caused the denial, but Coleman likely believed the latter was the main issue.
Much to his surprise, the photography trade also brought Coleman into the civil rights movement. Coleman later remembered:

G. J. [Sutton] and Claude Black were trying to get this integration deal started. They started through the housing situation. We understood that there was some money available for housing for minorities, and all we had to do was apply for it. Now, the City would not apply for it because we had contractors here that had been tied up with slum housing for poor people and building houses any kind of way they wanted to build them, and wherever they wanted to build them. And they [poor people] would have to go and live in them and have to pay for them, no matter what it costs. So G. J. and Claude came to the studio and [G. J.] said... “I tell you what I need you do for me. We need to do some pictures of these slum areas and show them the need for housing for blacks, and we need to close up these slums and get these slumlords out of the way and stop these folks from building the houses out here that aren’t up to standard.”

Sub-standard dwellings thus dovetailed with the Eastside’s inventory shortage to create a housing crisis for African Americans in Jim Crow San Antonio. While the federal government offered some hope to activists Sutton and Black, local government stood in their way. Just as Coleman had hoped to use the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to open his photography business, the two organizers hoped to use “some money”—probably a reference to the federal Housing Act of 1949, a Truman-era initiative that greatly expanded public housing projects especially for slum clearance—to improve living conditions on the Eastside. Yet city leaders, according to Coleman, deferred to the interests of developers and builders, thereby preventing the formation of a local housing authority that would be eligible to apply for the federal grants.

Sutton and Black settled on a public relations strategy centered on exposing the terrible conditions in the city’s slum housing, and Coleman, the Eastside’s eminent

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22 Coleman interview, file 1, 23:15. Note that Coleman uses “poor people” and “blacks” almost interchangeably in this excerpt.
photographer and by then a personal friend of the Reverend’s, was the man for the job. The trio visited Ellis Alley, one of the city’s most dilapidated areas. Coleman recalled that “everyone was afraid to go in there and take pictures because it was dangerous—the landlords would eradicate you.” But Coleman had a friend from the service who lived there and agreed to let the activists photograph his house. The activists took the developed prints to the mainstream daily press, but they wouldn’t print the images nor run their story. Neither would the black press, namely, the *San Antonio Register*, take up their cause. Coleman recalled that the latter was “tied up with advertising,” but it is also likely that the paper’s publisher and black political boss Valmo Bellinger would not have wanted to publicly challenge the city fathers. “So we decided, let’s just put out our own paper and we’ll get this message out,” Coleman remembered. “...We’ll just call it SNAP, because it will be snapshots to show people what we were doing...”

“It was supposed to be a temporary thing,” he continues, designed initially to assist only the housing campaign. But *SNAP News* instead became an institution in its own right, an independent, underground black newspaper that was willing to challenge both City Hall and its allies on the Eastside. It began as a booklet of photographs of the slums, but it soon added images of African American social events, clubs, and community life. Eventually, short news stories began appearing next to the images. And increasingly *SNAP* served as a forum for Coleman’s incisive political commentary, with fierce editorials produced in collaboration with Sutton and Black and carried into the community by all three men and the dozens of activists with whom they worked. The

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23 Coleman interview, file 1, 25:00-26:50.
24 Coleman interview, file 1, 26:50.
SNAP House, where the newspaper was printed, became one of the group’s organizing headquarters. Sutton’s election to the junior college board, the return of Rev. Black, the development of his social gospel, and the publication of the first SNAP in 1949 together comprised a turning point in Eastside politics. In all likelihood, nobody appreciated it more than Sutton, who had worked to outflank the City machine’s black wing as far back as the 1930s. Now, after a decade in the trenches, he had found a pair of dedicated organizers to join him, a place to gather and develop strategy, and above all an efficient way to spread their message to the masses.

**SNAP News: An Activist Organ**

Much of the early press run of SNAP was lost in a fire, but the surviving early issues provide the clearest window available to the history of the nascent African American civil rights movement in 1950s San Antonio. Even a quick scan reveals that Black, Sutton, and Coleman emerged as central players in what would become a decades-long, broadly-defined fight for democracy. From their roots in electoral politics, day care centers, and housing projects, they continued to advance an expansive agenda that included a wide range of both political and economic improvements. The paper illuminates what civil rights legend Ella Baker called the “slow, respectful work” of community organizing, showing how the trio and a coterie of like-minded activists gradually built real political power by reaching out to Eastside residents on an endless variety of issues.
*SNAP News* also illuminates the flexible, contingent approach that activists like Coleman and company adopted in the 1950s. They frequently clashed with the *Register’s* Valmo Bellinger, a stalwart ally of City Hall, but they still constantly tried to win his support for their cause and found ways to work with him when they could. In fact, *SNAP* editorials treated Bellinger much like they did any other politician, lauding him when he did what the more militant civil rights activists wanted and viciously assailing him when he didn’t.

More generally, Sutton, Black, Coleman, and company had few permanent allies and even fewer permanent enemies. They looked everywhere for support of their organizing, and they found it in unexpected places. While some degree of intra-ethnic conflict appears in the underground paper’s pages, so too do myriad examples of inter-ethnic coalition building. In fact, a close reading of *SNAP* suggests that these most militant African American organizers forged significant ties to a handful of like-minded ethnic Mexican as well as white labor, civil rights, and liberal political activists.

Like many civil rights activists across the South, organizers in San Antonio rooted their work in a prophetic Christianity centered on the social gospel. In fact, Rev. Black was a national leader in committing the African American wing of the Baptist church to the fight for civil rights. In 1951, at the annual gathering of the National Baptist Convention (of America), Rev. Black asked the president to increase the church’s commitment to the struggle. Much to Black’s surprise, the president agreed and created a Committee on Social Justice, and he made Black its chairman. The group was charged with gathering data related to violations of “both human and civil rights,” conducting
fact-finding investigations, and reporting the results back to the convention and the news media.\textsuperscript{25} For example, four years later, at the Convention’s “Diamond Jubilee” in Chicago, Rev. Black “urged the convention to make an appeal to Attorney General Brownell to investigate Citizens Councils being organized throughout the South,” according to a September 23, 1955, special \textit{SNAP} supplement.\textsuperscript{26}

At the same convention, Black also offered his vision for the larger struggle, emphasizing the need for transparency while forcefully rejecting African American religious and community leaders who stood in the way of civil rights organizers. \textit{SNAP} reports that Black “further stated that we cannot slip into Freedom, Freedom for the people must be open and above board, where the Negro is concerned, progressive leadership must not pamper reactionaries but deal with them as enemies though they be Negroes.” Racial solidarity alone would not produce change, nor would back-room dealing by gradualist intermediaries. Rather, only concerted, visible action by “progressive” leaders would lead to freedom. Rev. Black hammered his point home, \textit{SNAP} adds, urging “Ministers and Lay workers with 2,500 in attendance to face their responsibilities [f]or Social issues.”\textsuperscript{27}

In addition to advocating an immediate and open fight for “Freedom,” Rev. Black and \textit{SNAP}’s circle of activists also defined their goal extraordinarily broadly. This breadth jumps off the pages of \textit{SNAP}. Each weekly edition includes a few brief reports

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\textsuperscript{26} \textit{SNAP Extra!}, September 23, 1955, supplement, SABHC, MS 139, Box 1, Folder 35.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}
on social events and prominent institutions and individuals on the Eastside, run-of-the-mill church news and school features, information on the paper’s distribution and advertising, some salacious crime blotter, and a few brief jokes and funny snapshots—but about half of each issue features various types of political stories.

The March 16, 1956 issue is fairly representative of the newspaper’s surviving archive throughout the 1950s: it highlights concerns about police brutality, the spatial desegregation of public accommodations, equal employment opportunity, national and statewide civil rights stories, union and professional association news, and what might be called “race stories,” or blurbs on African Americans breaking barriers or otherwise making progress in white-dominated fields.28

Exposés on police brutality appear frequently in the newspaper, as do campaigns to investigate or remedy instances of abuse. The cover of the March 16, 1956, issue features a photograph of a wounded black man in a hospital bed with a clenched fist raised in the air. The large caption reads simply, “Officer shoots man.” No racial adjectives were necessary. On his way to work at a cafe, the man, Jack Nelson, cut through the parking lot of a tire shop when the “merchant policeman” spotted him and suspected that he was stealing. The officer screamed a command to halt and fired a shot in the air as Nelson began to run away. The second shot caught Nelson’s lower back “almost in front of the door to the Bottom Up Cafe” where he worked. An eye witness claimed that “the arrest could have been without it.” Another photograph features a black man leaning over and pointing to “blood on the side walk where Nelson fell.”

28 SNAP News, March 16, 1956, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 1, Folder 36, 1.
Surprisingly, the offending officer was arrested and charged with assault and intent to murder.29

The very next pages of the same issue center on the integration of public accommodations, namely, the city’s swimming pools. Rev. Black later remembered that the issue began when a Vacation Bible School sought to use a Westside pool in the summer of 1955:

The director of that group called the swimming pool and made arrangements. However, they did not know that it was a group of black children. When they got to the pool, the children began jumping out of the bus and running to the pool. As soon as the manager realized that these were black kids, he demanded they get out at once. The children were so disappointed and the adults were humiliated.

Rumors of the incident spread and later that same day, the city council called a special meeting to address the issue. There wasn’t an official ordinance on the books that forbid blacks from using city swimming pools. It was a matter of custom and they felt that we were no longer respecting their rules. To ensure that it never happened again, the council passed an ordinance...

SNAP adds that ordinance passed on June 19th, the anniversary of Emancipation in Texas.

The ordinance immediately came under fire from a number of directions—the March 16, 1956 SNAP reported that “members of the City Council in San Antonio began a serious study of the swimming pool situation,” including possibly rescinding the ordinance itself “in view of recent trends.” Above the piece are two photographs that explain the “recent trends.” In them, black and white boys stand side-by-side in chest-deep water. The caption reads, “San Antonio’s youth are already swimming together.

29 Ibid, 2-3. Police brutality appears frequently in the pages of SNAP. Another notable example came in 1959, when SNAP’s cover featured a photo of a man in a casket with the caption “killed by police officer.” The article outlines the man’s funeral services and notes that “Citizens Ask Investigation.” G. J. Sutton and Valmo Bellinger both led a group of citizens that approached the District Attorney’s office. SNAP News, September 12, 1959, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 3.
When the pools are integrated it will be nothing new to them.” In addition to making that cultural argument, the SNAP piece also notes that the Council was responding to a federal lawsuit that challenged the city ordinance and “a supporting state law.”

The NAACP appears frequently in the pages of SNAP, including the March 16 issue. Significantly, coverage focuses primarily on the local branch, which emerges as a militant activist organization. The picture of the local branch as well as the national initiatives that SNAP highlights call into question the common historical interpretation that sees the Association as primarily bureaucratic and legalistic. In San Antonio, the NAACP was part and parcel of a larger process of community organizing. The appeal titled “Why Join the NAACP?” in the March 16, 1956, SNAP offers three principle arguments. The article highlights the rise of massive resistance among lawmakers, including five Texans, and it points to the Association’s historic role in the civil rights struggle. It calls for “first-class citizenship” by 1963, and adds that “Unless the NAACP can receive the support it needs to carry on this battle, this objective will not be realized.” The third argument was perhaps the most surprising. “The local branch of the NAACP has launched, recently, an employment opportunities program,” the article reads. “This program’s objective is to open new areas of employment for the Negro citizens of San Antonio. In order for this program to be effective, a large membership is necessary.”

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30 Ibid. (SNAP News, March 16, 1956, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 1, Folder 36, 4-5). The article notes that the federal case was filed in March 1955, before the city ordinance was passed, following another incident that took place in April, 1954. It is likely that the city ordinance was an add-on to the original complaint.

31 Ibid, (SNAP News, March 16, 1956, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 1, Folder 36, 5).
The fight for equal employment opportunities did not emerge suddenly in the mid-1960s, after the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Rather, this and other similar SNAP stories suggest that it was always on the minds of militant activists like Coleman, Black, Sutton, and San Antonio NAACP Harry Burns, who likely authored the appeal.

Economic issues remained central components of larger questions of integration. In fact, a discussion of employment ran throughout the magazine’s coverage—in the same issue—of the Eighth Annual Session of the Bexar and Adjoining Counties Teachers’ Association. While the question of school integration reigned supreme, much of the proceedings centered on how integration would affect black teachers and job opportunities rather than the educational benefits for black students. The all-black quasi-union of teachers and principals “pointed to teacher growth as probably the best possible means of assuring teacher security,” SNAP reports. Session teachers “shared their experiences through exhibits and realistic demonstrations,” it continues, and a trio of white superintendents of nearby districts contributed their thoughts. One, Lyle Hill of Kenedy, Texas, claimed that the state was not ready for integrated teaching staffs because there were too few “qualified Negro teachers.” He blamed this on their poor living conditions and inferior training (rather than making claims about innate racial difference) but noted that integration was already underway where possible. While it promised to be a “long slow process” overall, “At this district conference there are qualified Negro teachers who would be accepted into the Kenedy school system because they could do the job.” J. G. Berry, the superintendent in nearby Hondo, offered unequivocal support.
for integrated teaching staffs. “Integration is working in the school system of Hondo,” he began. “...One Negro teacher was immediately transferred to the white school. She has been accepted by the other teachers and they consider her as just another teacher. This teacher has done an outstanding job and she has earned our respect.” Moreover, she continued to teach mixed classes despite the fact that several white parents had called to complain and request transfers for their kids. Dr. S. T. Scott, the principal of San Antonio’s all-black Douglass Junior High School, added that “integration can and must be a product of the people...The richest treasure of our American heritage is the democratic aspiration.”

Finally, the March 16 issue included the “Snap Haps,” a column with general notes on race, civil rights, and social justice around the state and nation. One blurb records that Governor Allan Shivers “announced that he is undertaking a national campaign to have interposition written in the platform of this year’s Democratic convention.” Interposition aimed to insert states’ rights more forcefully into the U. S. Constitution, thereby allowing Southern states to uphold segregation. The next blurb announces that the city of Marshall, a cotton producing town in deep northeast Texas, had appointed its first African American poll tax deputy. Two quick hits touch on a pair of white church groups that had recently met and denounced segregation, one noting that racial discrimination was “against the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” A final paragraph headlined “Race Baiting S. A. Policeman Fails” notes that the officer lost an appeal for

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32 Ibid, (SNAP News, March 16, 1956, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 1, Folder 36, 12-19).
re-instatement (the exact issue is omitted, suggesting that SNAP had previously covered it).  

Throughout the late 1950s, SNAP continued to publish news related to police brutality, integration of public accommodations, and a wide range of civil rights and “race” stories. Discussions of employment discrimination and other labor-related issues appear frequently and merit deeper exploration. Likewise, coverage of infrastructure problems and related activism, electoral politics, and inter-ethnic alliances all further reveal the expansive vision and diverse organizing projects of San Antonio’s most militant African American activists.

Employment and labor stories remained a common theme in SNAP in the late 1950s. In most cases, articles carried little more than a few sentences celebrating the accomplishments of one or more black workers, usually when the subject gained a new promotion or otherwise broke down racial barriers. One issue hails the return from temporary duty of one black and three ethnic Mexican sheet metal workers to Kelly Air Force Base, another lists twelve black workers who won awards for distinguished service at Ft. Sam Houston, and a third notes that the new automotive repair internship program of Prairie View College (the state’s oldest, public institution for African Americans) had finally placed a black student-intern into a job at a white-owned dealership, a first in San Antonio. Still other articles report on the NAACP’s studies of job discrimination and various fair employment campaigns in the North.

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33 Ibid, (SNAP News, March 16, 1956, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 1, Folder 36, 8-9).
34 “Kelly Workers Return to S.A.,” SNAP News, undated 1957 (Christmas cover), Box 2, Folder 1; “Prairie View College Automotive Department Place First Intee in San Antonio,” SNAP News, September 6,
But the most surprising piece combines these issues into a report on militant local organizing and a call for an unprecedented municipal ordinance. The brief “Nite Beat” blurb titled “G. J. Sutton Speaks for FEPC Law” speaks for itself:

G. J. Sutton, militant East side Civic leader, in COMPANY WITH AN INTER_RACIAL GROUP, spearheaded action on FEPC law in San Antonio. Mr. Sutton, addressing the City Council, indicated these observations: “Minority groups consider it to be a RIGHT rather than a privilege to earn a living. Discrimination can be found in every phase of business, INCLUDING government. By its very nature, council-manager government dictates that FEPC be ADOPTED....the city water board system was laid out by a NEGRO known as “Water Board Booker,” but Booker’s GRANDCHILDREN, today, CAN NOT GET A JOB WITH THE WATER BOARD, except as laborers. CITY COUNCIL DID NOT COMMENT ON THE PROPOSED ORDINANCE, but announced it would study the provisions of the proposal. [sic; ellipses and all emphasis original]36

This bold declaration was recorded in SNAP on December 12, 1958—nearly six years before the Civil Rights Act made employment discrimination illegal.

Its utterance indicates that community activists did not merely respond to federal action but provoked it by demanding change at the local level. The ordinance Sutton proposed was taken under advisement and promptly disappeared. The issue remained important to “militant” leaders like Sutton and Coleman and continued to animate local activism. Two weeks later, for example, SNAP’s new national columnist reported that

1957, Box 2, Folder 1; “Fort Sam Personnel Share Awards,” SNAP News, August 1, 1958, Box 2, Folder 2—all in SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139. Also see “Meet Lois Vann,” SNAP News, November 15, 1957, Box 2, Folder 1; “First Negro Salesman,” SNAP News, April 17, 1959, Box 2, Folder 3; “Menger Hotel Promotes Negro Employee to Department Head,” SNAP News, September 12, 1959, Box 2, Folder 3—all in SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139.
35 “St. Louis NAACP Raps Utilities Job Bias,” SNAP News, undated 1957 (Coral Yates cover), Box 2, Folder 1; “New Farm Labor Laws Not Enough, Wilkins,” SNAP News, May 2, 1958, Box 2 Folder 2; “NAACP Says Negro Unemployment Doubles that of White,” SNAP News, May 23, 1958, Box 2, Folder 2—all in SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139.

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the President’s Committee on Government Contracts had found several firms guilty of employment discrimination, while still noting that the agency “has not revoked a single contract since its inception.” 37 Back in San Antonio, Sutton and his “inter-racial group” continued to push for non-discrimination ordinances, and they found a sympathetic audience at the Bexar County Commissioners Court. A resolution passed in May, 1959, required of “all future contracts for county construction clauses forbidding the contractor from discriminating against any employe [sic] or applicant because of race, religion, color, or national origin.” 38

Sutton, Coleman, and other activists that surrounded SNAP understood the black freedom struggle in broad terms, encompassing not only the integration of schools, swimming pools, and other public accommodations, but also employment and myriad economic concerns. The latter included a sustained effort to improve the Eastside’s physical infrastructure, a longstanding issue that promised to bolster daily living conditions and produce ongoing economic development.

SNAP frequently disseminated information about such infrastructure-related struggles. For example, an issue from 1957 headlined “City Begins Improvements” reports that two-thirds of the nearly $4 million budget would be spent on drainage and flood control, with the balance going to “street work and the installation of sanitary sewers.” Most importantly, “Of special note to Negro citizens is the...Spriggsdale

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38 See below for a discussion of this “inter-racial group” and the reasons why the County passed the resolution while the City did not. “Court Ends Discrimination,” SNAP News, May 8, 1959, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 3.
drainage project” on the Eastside’s Salado Creek, coming with a price tag of $427,000 (ellipses added). 39 Another issue that year featured two photographs of flooded streets under the headline, “Wading or Waiting.” Coleman writes that he took the pictures while walking his son to school, adding that three places along their route were impassable.

“Pictures above prompt the caption for this article,” the piece begins. “Are we waiting for sufficient street, drainage, and sidewalk improvement to eliminate such as this or are we...prompted by the coaxing of the City Fathers...wading through ever rising waters to our schools and homes?” (ellipses original). The article notes the health risks of such flooding in addition to the safety issues, and adds that organizing is the solution to the broader problem of negligence by the City:

We have long advocated improvement of this situation... In fact, SNAP prompted the recent visit of a group of citizens from this area who called on city hall in an effort to get some action... What must we do to alleviate this condition? Parents of students in the new school—as well as residents of the area—must prepare for a “March on City Hall,” before we are trapped, and permanent damage is done to our homes, buildings, and health [first ellipses original; second ellipses added]. 40

It is unlikely that the proposed march ever took place, but both the monitoring of the issue and the call to action still clearly illuminate the program of SNAP and affiliated organizers.

In late 1958, flooding and infrastructure improvements again dominated the pages of SNAP. A picture of school children walking down a flooded Nebraska Street sits below a portrait of a smiling African American woman and a header reading, “Atty.

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39 “City Begins Improvements,” SNAP News, undated 1957 (Pearl Thompson Frye cover), SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 1.
40 Eugene Coleman, “Wading or Waiting,” SNAP News, September 27, 1957, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 1.
Briscoe Reports on $1,000,000 Bond Issue.” Yet the caption masks the fact that her report centered on activism rather than legal maneuvering. “Atty. Briscoe presented to the City Council a petition bearing some 700 names of residents of the [Wheatley Heights and Homestakes] area, requesting that the improvement due in the Area be carried out as a result of the recent Bond Issue which was voted [sic].” SNAP’s columnist (probably Coleman) adds that the Director of Public Works recommended that the City allocate $659,000 to Eastside drainage work that should be rapidly contracted out and completed—probably at the same Spriggsdale Blvd and Salado Creek site that had been proposed in 1957. Three nearby streets would also be paved and a fourth renovated upon completion of the drainage system, the article adds. Despite the seemingly good news, the piece ends with an alarmed warning: “However, the UNSAVORY part of the report...pointed out that the Nebraska St. [railroad] underpass WILL NOT BE WIDENED...This project will have to be done at a later date.” SNAP would continue to call for a new underpass for years.\(^{41}\) About a month later, SNAP ran a full-page ad and accompanying editorial urging citizens to vote for road bonds for the Eastside’s District 3. It notes that matching funds will make the $2 million bond grow to $17 million in total new highways and roads, of which $9 million “will be spent for labor right here at home,” presumably including unskilled jobs performed by African Americans. (On the

other hand, this article appeared in the same issue as G. J. Sutton’s call for a local fair employment ordinance.)\(^4\)

All of the coverage of infrastructure issues suggests that demands for roads, bridges, underpasses, and drainage ditches were far from tangential to the broader civil rights struggle. Rather, like employment, infrastructure represented a key component of economic uplift and community development. These struggles also connect the calls for marches, petitioning, and legal wrangling often associated with the black freedom movement to another critical arena in which SNAP was heavily engaged: electoral politics.

**“Texas Negroes Organize”**

In many ways, electoral politics was SNAP’s *raison d’être*. From reports on the formation of local political clubs and the endorsement of candidates to op-ed pieces that attempted to hold politicians accountable once in office, few issues of SNAP were released that did not contain some political commentary. Likewise, articles on police brutality, employment, infrastructure, and integration all drew attention to the City Council and other elected bodies and officials. Even seemingly innocuous society news often had a political undertone—for example, one issue notes that attorney Hattie Briscoe was elected as the president of a prominent sorority, but it doesn’t mention her flood

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\(^4\) “Vote for District 3 Road Bonds,” *SNAP News*, January 16, 1959, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 3. The ad credits “Paid. adv. of Road District 3 Bond Comm.,” but verbatim text appears in the editorial, suggesting that the committee may have included Coleman or at least that the paper endorsed the action.
control petition or other activism. Several pieces on the election of NAACP “Freedom Queens” likewise combine the social with the fight for civil rights.

Yet it was the electoral sphere itself that produced the most dynamism within the pages of SNAP. Coleman and his staff writers worked with Sutton and other activists in an all-out campaign for real political power for the Eastside’s African American residents. Sutton’s mortuary business occasionally ran advertisements in SNAP, but the undertaker also privately bankrolled the paper when Coleman experienced hard times. SNAP became the organ of Sutton’s decades-long quest to organize an independent black voting bloc that could coalesce with other liberal factions to govern San Antonio.

Several examples offer critical insights into the nature of this political wing of the nascent black freedom movement. The May 24, 1957, issue reports on the formation of a new political action group among African Americans. “Texas Negroes Organize,” reads the teaser on the magazine’s front cover. Some “200 Negro leaders from various parts of the state” came together at Rev. Black’s Mt. Zion First Baptist Church “to overcome inadequate government and the apathetic attitudes on educational opportunities.”

Integration may have been one of the group’s goals, but it appeared subordinate to access and above all political power. The group would not compete with the NAACP but work side-by-side in the political arena. It “set up as one of its main objectives a Poll Tax Crusade which will seek to have 500,000 qualified Negroes at the polls in 1958,” the story continued.

Additional objectives include: a concerted effort to get qualified Negroes to run for offices and positions in government; greater participation by Negroes in local political parties will be encouraged; Fair Employment Legislation is a key law that the group will seek to have passed, and special attention will be given to highly segregated East Texas.

Political power and fair employment again proved paramount. A photograph depicts the newly elected temporary officers of the still unnamed group, and a caption provides names. Rev. C. W. Black was named overall Chairman, state NAACP leader H. Boyd Hall of Corpus Christi became chairman of the Legal Committee, G. J. Sutton chaired the Political Committee, and Arthur Dewitty of Austin was charged with Organization. Perhaps the most revealing name was that of the Second Vice Chairman of this “Negro” political action group: one Albert Fuentes, a Westside community organizer and the chief of staff for County Commissioner Albert Peña, a militant ethnic Mexican leader.45

SNAP’s coverage of national and state politicians provides similar insight into the minds of San Antonio’s most militant civil rights activists. In the fall of 1957, several months after the formation of the political action group, the paper ran a front-page open letter to newly-elected Senator Ralph Yarborough, a white liberal Democrat from East Texas. Yarborough had long campaigned as the champion of the poor and downtrodden, but he walked a tightrope when it came to civil rights, hoping to attract black voters to his New Deal liberalism without alienating working-class whites. SNAP activists found this waffling unacceptable, jumping on an Associated Press interview with the Senator to pen a scathing critique:

45 “Political Action Group,” SNAP News, May 24, 1957, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 1. See below for more on Peña.
Which side of the fence are you on, Mr. Yarborough? What do you mean when you say that the Federal Government blundered in the Little Rock situation?...Do you mean to imply the Federal Government should have stayed out of a situation that had gotten to be a “national menace?” Do you mean that the nine Negro students attending Central High in Little Rock were not in danger of bodily harm? If this be the case it is difficult to visualize you as the Yarborough who had the courage to run for the U. S. Senate, with the knowledge that Negro votes would see you through. It is difficult to visualize you as the Yarborough who canvassed the East side of San Antonio...asking that the Negroes vote for you as you were to be the representative of all peoples, not a slippery few...

...Obviously, being elected to the Senate of the United States has made a different man of you.

Senator Yarborough, if you feel that the Federal Government erred in sending troops to Little Rock, to guarantee nine Negro children the rights given them by the Constitution of the United States, the U.S. Supreme Court, and God Almighty (and AP said that you said it) then you obviously are not the same man the Negroes of Texas voted for.46

The SNAP editorial left no room for fence-sitting. Yarborough either supports “all peoples” and their Constitutional rights as interpreted in the Brown v. Board ruling, or he betrayed the trust of the voters who propelled him to office. The piece includes a photograph of two black leaders standing with candidate Yarborough “indicating their endorsement” of his campaign, and adds that even these most vociferous of his supporters had been ignored lately by the Senator’s office. “Despite the fact that Negro votes carried you in Bexar County,” neither man was invited to a “recent banquet held here,” and “Despite the fact that Rev. Patterson worked hard and long in your behalf, you did not even show him the courtesy of replying to his telegram” during the debate on the Civil Rights Act of 1957.

46 “An Open Letter to Senator Yarborough,” SNAP News, undated 1957 (Yarborough cover), SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 1. For more on Yarborough, see the discussion below.
Significantly, the piece describes the tireless labor of Rev. Nelson P. Patterson and Rev. Jno. DeLeon Walker, not the efforts of Sutton, Black, and their cohort of activists. The absence of the latter group from the article indicates that they did not endorse Yarborough’s campaign, suggesting that they likely campaigned for a candidate they thought had a better chance of winning the race. The SNAP editorial, likely penned by Coleman, thus denounces the Senator for straying from his rhetoric at the same time that it serves as a reminder of their own group’s superior political leadership for black San Antonio—it can be read as a sort of “I told you so” to the ministers who had attempted to outflank them by supporting the standard-bearer of the Texas liberal left. Coleman admits that they chose the wrong horse, but also highlights how little the two political outsiders had to show for their victory.

Yet the article ends with a prescriptive vision for how to move forward, calling on Yarborough to stick to his more egalitarian pronouncements and highlighting the role of SNAP (and by extension Sutton, Black, and others) in holding him accountable in the future. “It is hightime that our elected representatives, not of a few, but of all Texans, begin to stick to the same promises in all their pre-election talks... Rest assured, when the Senator is again in San Antonio, SNAP will endeavor to be one of those on hand to talk with him.”47

47 Ibid. The inference that SNAP-affiliated activists supported a more viable candidate is my own, based on my oral history interviews with Coleman and Black and the magazine’s entire available press run. Both show a great deal of flexibility toward candidates and a persistent skepticism toward liberals’ campaign promises. They often desired power and access more than someone who was ideologically committed but not necessarily viable or reliable once in office.
Other issues of SNAP highlighted problems with the state’s conservative Democrats, especially Governor Price Daniel, who served from 1957 to early 1963. Daniel was Yarborough’s longtime intraparty rival and an arch-segregationist, and he ran on a strong segregationist platform as he sought reelection in 1958. Evangelist Billy Graham scheduled a revival to take place in San Antonio, and many of the city’s black ministers endorsed the event. But Graham surprised them by inviting Governor Daniel to introduce him—on the night before the election! SNAP reports that Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell sent a telegram to Graham asking that he rescind his invitation to Daniel. Powell charged that Daniel was “‘an un-Christian segregationist.’” SNAP reported that the Governor refused to reply to the Congressman’s charge. Daniel’s office did issue a release that “he regrets the protest” and that he accepted the speaking engagement as “‘one of Billy Graham’s friends, and an interested laymen.’” The next leaf of the magazine features a full-page advertisement for a special sermon by Rev. Black, titled “Is the Governor Hell Bound?” The activists boycotted the revival, which took place as scheduled with Daniel offering the introduction and a “token” black minister appearing on stage.

SNAP and the activists surrounding the paper also took proactive action in support of various candidates, especially for local and state office. One critical campaign centered on the attempt to elect Marvin Cobb to the post of County Commissioner for Precinct No. 4, which included the Eastside. Cobb, a white man, appeared on the cover

48 “Daniel Refuses Answer to Negro” and advertisement, both in SNAP News, July 25, 1958, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 2; Black and Matthews, Grandpa Was a Preacher, 98-99.
49 Ibid, 99.
of SNAP just before the election on July 26, 1958—the same issue that denounced Governor Price Daniel. A two-page spread featured a letter to “Citizens of Bexar County” with eight signatures on the bottom, led by Rev. Black, Sutton, and Coleman. “For a number of years, we have been working for representation of Negroes in City and County Government,” the letter begins. The task has been “exceedingly difficult” because elected officials have refused to include African Americans on local boards and other “responsible places in the community government,” despite having qualified candidates. “We are supporting Mr. Cobb because Mr. Cobb is willing to support a Negro, not only as a member of the Hospital Board, but all other Boards that are appointed...” While the incumbent believes “that he can still fool the Negro voter,” Cobb, the challenger will provide the appointments. “A Commissioner who will vote for Negroes is the Commissioner who will receive the Negro vote,” it concludes, along with a quick endorsement of gubernatorial candidate Henry B. Gonzalez.50

An even more desperate appeal titled “Why the Negro Can’t Afford to Vote for Mr. Ploch” highlights a number of specific grievances. After twelve years in office, Ploch “has spoken as openly as he could (being a politician) and has admitted he has not done what he could have done for the Negro...” SNAP advises that “Voters won’t forget.” Members of the National Alliance, the all-black union of mail handlers and letter carriers, will remember when Ploch cancelled their reservation to use a county park for a gathering without notice and then “closed the door in their faces” when they attempted to explain the difficulty and cost of finding a new location. Voters will note that he claimed

50 “Citizens of Bexar County,” SNAP News, July 25, 1958, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 2.
to be a “great road builder and paver of streets,” but why then “do we still have the Nebraska Street overpass and a narrow, death trap...?” Most boldly, SNAP denounces Ploch for opposing Gonzalez’ campaign for governor:

How could you be so cold blooded as to forbid the Mexicans, who give so much of their sweat and blood, to work for Mr. Henry Gonzales [sic]. You have threatened them with loss of their jobs if they are found working for Gonzalez... Mr. Ploch, if you fight Gonzalez, you are fighting every Negro and Mexican in our County. You are also fighting anyone who stands for right and justice.  

A full page advertisement for Gonzalez also appears in the issue. Ploch defeated Cobb in the election, but the latter carried the black vote. The next issue of SNAP includes another letter to Ploch demanding that he appoint an African American to the hospital board and fulfill his campaign commitments to improve the East Side. Another piece titled “SNAP Says ‘Thanks’” notes that the returns prove “that A MAN IN OFFICE CAN NO LONGER VOTE AGAINST US AND EXPECT FOR US TO SUPPORT HIM AT THE POLLS.” The incumbent was “shocked to see his ‘Negro’ vote” go to the opposition despite the fact that he outspent Cobb and had 40 workers to two Cobb representatives at some Eastside polling places.  

As each of these examples show, electoral political action meant choosing candidates, campaigning in the press and on the streets, and then working to hold them accountable once in office. It meant standing up in public to denounce liberals and conservatives alike when they turned their back on the struggle for civil rights. It meant

51 “Why the Negro Can’t,” SNAP News, July 25, 1958, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 2.
52 “Gonzales for Governor,” display ad, SNAP News, July 25, 1958, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 2.
53 “SNAP Says ‘Thanks,'” SNAP News, August 1, 1958, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 2.
demanding tangible neighborhood improvements, representation on boards if not elected office, and courteous and accountable treatment as constituents and voters. Above all, it meant organizing the community to declare independence from the old system of machine paternalism and neglect that still survived despite the rise of the nonpartisan “reformers” in the Good Government League.

Politics also meant crossing the color line to endorse candidates like Marvin Cobb, an Anglo, and Henry B. Gonzalez, a Mexican American. In fact, for Sutton, Black, Coleman, and other SNAP-allied activists, politics was from the beginning an inter-racial enterprise, and it began on the ground in inter-racial meetings. Recall that the “political action group” formed by 200 “Negroes” in the summer of 1957 also included an ethnic Mexican organizer, Albert Fuentes, as its second vice chairman. The efforts to campaign for Cobb a year later also included an endorsement of City Councilman Gonzalez in his long shot gubernatorial candidacy.

Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that multiracial alliances between black and ethnic Mexican activists as well as whites came to define politics in San Antonio. Elite governance, of course, had always depended upon inter-racial partnerships—the old machine needed Charles Bellinger, and the GGL now relied upon Valmo Bellinger and other “token” leaders on the Eastside. Several elite Mexican Americans had coalesced into a “Westside GGL” that likewise spread patronage in exchange for votes. Liberals and others had also experimented in forming their own coalitions independent of City Hall. G. J. Sutton joined Maury Maverick’s mayoral campaigns and the ethnic Mexican
pecan sheller movement in the late 1930s, and he again formed an electoral alliance with Gus Garcia in 1948.

Yet in the late 1950s such sporadic experiments on the left slowly transitioned toward becoming a permanent coalition that could vie with the GGL and its allies for significant political power. Sutton was at the center of this new effort, joined by his counterparts among ethnic Mexicans and white labor and liberal activists. But before examining the partnership itself, it remains necessary to briefly survey the histories of its other participants.

“A Time to Learn”: Organizing the Westside

Political scientist Rudolfo Rosales writes that “the approach to political inclusion was the most visible demarcating line” in San Antonio’s ethnic Mexican civic life in the postwar period, with different philosophies “creating an intense internal conflict.” On the one hand, a “conservative sector” sought power and access through relationships with white businessmen and the Good Government League. In virtually every campaign cycle during the GGL’s existence, at least one ethnic Mexican was included on its slate and thereby gained one or more seats on the City Council as well as entrée to the backroom meetings where most decisions were made. On the other hand, activists in the “liberal sector” advocated independent organization and autonomous political power. “At the same time,” Rosales adds, “there was still a constant overlap...” in which the “switching of sides was not uncommon...” Particular activists changed strategies, and the separate factions at times formed temporary partnerships. Such blurriness meant that cooperation
across this “most visible demarcating line” was not impossible, but much more commonly a sharp line did in fact divide conservatives who sought inclusion from liberals who sought independent representation.\textsuperscript{54}

Just as political philosophy divided ethnic Mexican political life in San Antonio, it also produced a factional division within the local Democratic Party. As noted in Chapter 2, conservatives across Texas remained staunch Democrats on every day except Election Day, when they increasingly voted for Republicans, especially for national offices. The Bexar County Democratic Party, in turn, mirrored the state body: white conservatives affiliated with the Chamber of Commerce and the GGL controlled its executive committee as well as the county’s delegation to Austin. Ethnic Mexican and African American conservatives joined them, while liberals of all colors remained outsiders.

Following the Chamber of Commerce reaction to the Sutton-Garcia coalition of 1948, conservatives dominated neighborhood, city, county, and intra-party politics. While Sutton and company developed an independent alternative on the Eastside, the creation of a “liberal sector” on the Westside picked up steam with the arrival of attorney and community organizer Albert A. Peña, Jr. Born in 1917 on the Westside of San Antonio, Peña served during World War II and attended St. Mary’s University in San Antonio on the G. I. Bill. He went to the South Texas School of Law in Houston,

\textsuperscript{54} Rosales, \textit{The Illusion of Inclusion}, 42, 50-55 (all quotations on 51).
graduating and passing the Texas State bar in 1950. He didn’t really want to be a lawyer, but his father wanted his son to follow him into the profession.\textsuperscript{55}

It is unclear exactly how he developed a passion for politics, but he credits a group of “liberal-minded” white labor activists who “educated” him while he was in law school in Houston.\textsuperscript{56} In any event, he went to work as an attorney, and his first legal actions centered on the ethnic Mexican struggle for civil rights. He quickly joined the American G. I. Forum (AGIF), an organization founded by Dr. Hector Garcia of Corpus Christi to advocate for ethnic Mexican veterans after World War II. In 1951, Garcia asked Peña to investigate some school discrimination complaints that the Forum had received from \textit{Mexicano} residents of the small town of Hondo, forty miles west of the Westside. Peña traveled to the hamlet and met with the school superintendent, who told the lawyer that the district maintained two schools: one for Anglos, one for \textit{Mexicanos}.

At a preliminary hearing, Peña made the superintendent testify, and the latter verified his earlier conversation. But the local district declared that it separated students based on language proficiency, not language difference or ethnicity. In other words, they couldn’t attend the main Anglo school because they couldn’t read in either English or Spanish. They believed this to be Constitutional in accordance with the \textit{Delgado} case won three

\textsuperscript{55} José Ángel Gutiérrez, Oral History Interview with Albert Peña, Jr., CMAS 15, \textit{Tejano Voices}, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries, 8-10.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid}, 11 (both quotations). One was steelworker Ed Ball, who brought Peña into Truman’s presidential campaign in Houston in 1948. The duo sat in the black section in order to protest segregation at a local speech by Congressman Sam Rayburn shortly after the Democratic victory that year. Al Heiken, “‘The Only Way I Want to Win,’” \textit{Texas Observer}, July 4, 1959, 5.
years earlier by Gus Garcia (no relation to Hector). Peña appealed the case to the State Board of Education.\textsuperscript{57}

What happened next transformed Peña from a novice civil rights attorney into a community organizer and political activist. The State Board sat on the appeal, refusing to issue a ruling on the whether or not the policy was Constitutional. Peña later recalled:

We couldn’t get any decision from them and the people in Hondo are getting, they were getting pissed off at me because I was like the rest of them [civil rights lawyers]; I wasn’t doing anything. So, I called a meeting of the, a special meeting in Hondo and invited all the Mexicano families and bring all the Mexicano families and we met at the Guadalupe Church and I told them, “look, I am not.... This is my first case and I am not the best lawyer in the country but, we are going to integrate these schools.” This was just before the fall semester. “And we are going to go and we are going to enroll our kids in the Main Plant and we are going to stay there if it takes all day or it takes a week or it takes a month. But we are going to stay there until they enroll our children in the school.” And that is what we did.\textsuperscript{58}

Mexicano parents approached the Anglo school, got in the registration line, and then tried to enroll their kids when it was their turn. When the registrar rejected them, they would move to the back of the line and repeat. “We stayed there all day and we were singing,” he later recalled.

I advised them not to be violent, just sing and have a good time and just stay there, just, and right after, this was in the morning, about eight o’clock and about one o’clock, they got the, they received a telegram from Austin, from the State Board saying, integrate. So, we had won our case and what had happened was that some newspaper picked it up and the State School Board called a hurried meeting and decided that, they were told by their lawyers the best thing to do is integrate, because they are going stay there, because this Albert Pena, he is a radical, and I don’t know what else they called me. But he is going to stay there until you

\textsuperscript{57} Peña, interview by Gutiérrez, 4-7.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid}, 7.
integrate them, so that is what they did was that they integrated both schools.\textsuperscript{59}

A second school case centered in Lytle, Texas, completed Peña’s transition into politics. The first case had come from the G. I. Forum, but this time the complaint went from Lytle parents to the League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the oldest ethnic Mexican civil rights organization in the U. S., founded in Texas in the 1920s. Several lawyers had already investigated the issue and had come back with nothing, so LULAC leaders asked Peña, fresh off his victory in Hondo, to visit the small town twenty-five miles southwest of San Antonio. Representing LULAC Council #2 but working \textit{pro bono}, Peña traveled to Lytle and discovered a remarkably similar example of segregated schooling. He again appeared at a hearing of the school board, where one minister in attendance called him a communist. Still, the school board relented and integrated the schools. Peña had developed a formula that worked both for the Mexicano residents of small towns like Hondo and Lytle and for Peña himself: “I got calls from all over South Texas and I would either go down there, I would talk to the school board and the superintendent, and I didn’t have to go to court anymore. I didn’t have to get anymore hearings. They would integrate the school districts,” he later remembered. As a result, Peña adds, he also became “well known in South Texas and in Bexar County,” which in turn “started my political career.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Ibid}, 8.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Ibid}, 14-16 (first quotation on 15; second and third quotations on 16). At the Lytle hearing, Peña was accompanied by his friend Willie Maldonado, head of the laborers’ union and a deputy sheriff. Maldonado doubled as Peña’s bodyguard when a group of whites surrounded them after the attorney’s testimony. Peña feared it was a lynch mob, but in fact it was a group of white teachers who thanked him for advocating integration. Maldonado nonetheless had his hand on his service revolver, just in case.
In 1952, Peña and Willie Maldonado, head of the laborers’ union in San Antonio, sought to harness this groundswell of energy for use in the political arena. Doing so required the development of new, independent institutions, innovative strategies, and above all, far-reaching coalitions. Peña later recalled:

Well, the, the, they had what they call, they had a liberal group in San Antonio, but they had no Mexicanos. The only Mexicanos groups, the only Mexicanos groups we had on the West Side, they were either controlled by some politician in the courthouse or some vendido (sell out) on the West Side, so they always had them split up. So, we organized what we called the Loyal American Democrats, Willie and I and several other people... we got some people that we figured were liberal-minded, didn’t belong to any of the factions over there on the West Side, and we insisted that you could join, but we would not accept people, politicians in office or anyone that worked for a politician in office. This is going to be strictly independent.

The new group’s patriotic name masked its heterodox agenda. Organizing at the height of the Korean War, Peña and company constantly had to guard against anti-communist accusations. “Loyal” and “American” both reflect the activists’ conscious effort to guard against such threats. They needed this cover because of their radical goal: to independently organize ethnic Mexican residents of San Antonio into an explicitly partisan club that could, in turn, support liberal politicians. By positioning the group to avoid the existing Westside factions, especially the “vendidos” who collaborated with the GGL, Peña and Maldonado created an unprecedented, autonomous institution through which the “liberal sector” could begin mass organizing among Mexicano Democrats. 61

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61 Ibid, 16. Rosales confirms that the Loyal American Democrats had two basic rules: “elected officeholders could not be members” and “members had to be Chicano [ethnic Mexican].” A third, unspoken rule was its liberal tendency, which effectively blocked conservative ethnic Mexicans from membership. Rosales, The Illusion of Inclusion, 55-56. Peña also remembered that he used examples of Mexicano service in the Korean War as a defense against the Communism charge in Lytle (as well as an argument for integration). Peña, interview by Gutiérrez, 14-15.
Along with the new institution came a new electoral strategy. Rosales aptly sums up this period: “For these activists it was a time to learn.” The persistence of at-large municipal elections made city council races all but impossible, so Peña and the Loyal American Democrats (LAD) shifted their focus to precinct-level organizing with the ultimate goals of taking over the Bexar County Democratic Party and electing liberals to the state legislature. Peña later recalled,

What happened was that we learned how to organize by becoming very active in the precinct conventions, and we learned how to carry our conventions. We had our delegates...We would have poll tax drives and it and it was very difficult because you had to pay, it was $1.75 and $1.75 was a lot of money... We talked about Mexicano power and the only way we are going to have a voice is by voting. You had to have a poll tax to vote and the first three letters of the federal constitution, “We the People,” that’s us, and nobody, if, and if, if we gripe about government, we are griping about ourselves because we are government and we are not going to change it unless we organize.

Peña adds that the group’s “involvement with the Democratic Party taught us organization; how to take over conventions.” Westside printer and liberal activist Ruben Munguia similarly gained new organizing skills by participating in local Democratic Party gatherings. He recalls that the old liberal ex-Congressman and former mayor Maury Maverick (Sr.) “recruited me to participate in precinct convention politics... I told him I didn’t know what to do... He said he just wanted me to participate so as to learn how they work.”

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63 Peña, interview with Gutiérrez, 18-20.
64 Peña oral history interview, quoted in Rosales, *The Illusion of Inclusion*, 54.
65 Ruben Munguia oral history interview, quoted in Rosales, *The Illusion of Inclusion*, 54.
LAD activists gradually taught themselves how to win at the polls. In the spring of 1952, Peña ran for state representative in the Democratic primary election, working on a liberal ticket along with two Anglos. His two white counterparts won their primaries, but Peña lost to a white conservative. Rosales concludes that the election established a new trend: “Although the Chicano precincts generally supported the liberal ticket as a whole, Anglo-dominated precincts did not support the Chicanos on the tickets.”

Later that spring, Peña, Maverick, and Munguia staged a rump caucus during the Democratic Party’s county convention in hopes of electing a liberal to serve as county chairman. The San Antonio Labor Council, AFL, opposed their selection, but the liberals remained recalcitrant and forced the conference to hold several rounds of voting late, delaying the selection of the chairman late into the opening evening. Their education continued.

In October, 1952, LAD took to the streets to rally in support of Adlai Stevenson, the liberal Democratic presidential candidate. Party conservatives opposed the event and did everything they could to stop it, but LAD asserted its own power by threatening, in Munguia’s words, to “send telegrams to every Mexican community between here and California, telling them of what you have done and what Adlai Stevenson will do always, and we’ll make them all Republicans.” The rally occurred as scheduled, even as the conservatives denied the activists police protection, a platform, and other city services. The gathering at Milam Square on the near Westside represented the first presidential visit to San Antonio’s barrios and was the greatest achievement yet for Peña and other

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66 Rosales, The Illusion of Inclusion, 55.
67 Ibid, 54.
68 Quoted in Ibid, 56.
liberal activists. Following the program, thousands marched to the Alamo, symbolically announcing LAD as a new force in Texas politics. (Meanwhile, led by Governor Shivers, conservative Democrats carried the state for the Republican nominee, Dwight Eisenhower.)

Rosales argues that the rally itself “did very little to assure Chicano activists a role in party politics.” Instead, it signaled the beginning of the activists’ commitment to organizing in the “trenches” of precinct politics. Indeed, Peña and other liberals continued to work door-to-door, street-by-street, and block after block. They actively participated in the 1953 municipal and 1954 state and federal elections, but little evidence of their work in these years survives. The factional dispute in Westside politics continued, with the conservative group continuing to hold the upper hand.

Then, in 1955, Peña was narrowly elected president of LULAC Council #2, the venerable civil rights organization’s oldest and only active local unit in San Antonio. Rosales writes that Peña’s slim margin “was indicative of the conflict over goals,” but the victory still marked a significant achievement for the liberal faction. Peña predictably committed the historically apolitical group to working the electoral arena. Using the group’s relatively large resources to work in the trenches, Peña appointed Munguia to implement a poll tax drive in anticipation of the 1956 elections. It would turn out to be a banner year for the city’s ethnic Mexican liberals.

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69 Ibid, 56-57.
70 Ibid, 57.
71 Ibid, 57-58. See the discussion of this election below.
Through LAD and countless precinct committees, Peña and company slowly built a powerful, independent political apparatus. Yet the linchpin of their success was not simply the endogenous organizing of a single, mono-ethnic faction, as Rosales asserts. Rather, it was the multiracial coalition that ultimately underpinned the triumphs of Peña and the “liberal sector.” Rosales all but ignores this critical development, casting non-Mexicanos either as inert objects affected by Westside politics or as negative agents who were at best fickle allies with la raza. G. J. Sutton appears as a more dedicated partner, but Eastside activism and coalition efforts alike play subordinate, supportive roles to what Rosales depicts as the main act happening on the Westside.

Yet Peña and the Westside liberals did not participate in multiracial coalitions as an afterthought, as Rosales would have his readers believe. Rather, Peña’s decision to build partnerships with Sutton, Maverick, and other black and white labor and liberal activists represented a central strategic development that allowed the “liberal sector” to finally (albeit partially) vanquish its conservative foes. Coalition building across ethnic lines both stemmed from and shaped the interior politics of San Antonio’s ethnic Mexican communities, propelling some of the activists into elected office and permanently altering the balance of power within the local and state Democratic parties.

Peña began making overtures to black and white activists around town in the early 1950s. From the early days of LAD forward, “we started working with the Blacks, [a] very small group of Blacks” Peña later recalled. G. J. Sutton was their leader.\(^7\) Little evidence survives on the early relationship between the two cadres of activists, but it’s

\(^7\) Peña, interview by Gutiérrez, 16.
clear that a common political philosophy helped bring them together. Both groups
tрендed toward the liberal end of the spectrum, but more importantly, they both
demanded independent representation and autonomy from the elites that filled City Hall,
the Chamber of Commerce, and the GGL. Both demanded civil rights for their groups
and took to the streets to engage in direct action when necessary. Both approached
electoral politics as a means to an end, a way to win power for their communities rather
than an end in itself. Inclusion on boards and commissions meant little if they did not
also have the freedom to vote how they wished. Tokenism was plainly inadequate in
their views, and only community organizing would produce an autonomous force capable
of demanding significant social change.

The “very small group of Blacks” and the “liberal sector” of ethnic Mexicans also
shared an affinity for a charismatic, truly independent politician named Henry Barbosa
Gonzalez. Born in 1916, “Henry B.,” as he was affectionately known, grew up in a
relatively prosperous household on San Antonio’s Westside. He attended predominately
Anglo schools, receiving a classical education at Jefferson High, San Antonio College,
and the University of Texas at Austin. One biographer writes, “...the story goes that he
used to practice English and oratory in front of a mirror at home, and was reading
Descartes and Carlyle by age sixteen.” After a stint in the service during World War II,
Gonzalez got a job at the local courthouse and eventually rose to the rank of chief
probation officer. He helped his father run a translation service and became an office of
an elite hemispheric voluntary association, the Pan American Progressive Association.
Gonzalez’s elite connections did not, however, give him automatic entrée to the even more exclusive world of San Antonio elite politics. In 1950, he ran on a liberal ticket for the state legislature. Gonzalez’s candidacy failed, but Maury Maverick Jr., who ran alongside him, credited the Westside Gonzalez vote for his own narrow victory. In 1953, Gonzalez won a seat on the San Antonio City Council despite running as an independent; his rare victory came at a unique moment of disorder and discord within the Chamber of Commerce crowd (and led to the formalization of the GGL). Once in office he proved himself a skilled negotiator, and he briefly served as mayor pro tempore.\textsuperscript{73}

More importantly, Gonzalez soon became known for speaking out against the segregation of public facilities, including city swimming pools.\textsuperscript{74} As Rev. Black and the SNAP activists began approaching the council to demand inclusion for African Americans, Henry B. emerged as their most reliable ally. In 1956, for example, Gonzalez demanded that the city reconsider its new segregation ordinance covering city pools.\textsuperscript{75}

Yet Henry B. remained fiercely independent, refusing to subsume his political career to the broader organizing projects of LAD and LULAC (both led by Peña) and other ethnic Mexican activists in the “liberal sector.” Gonzalez labored to find a middle ground that allowed him to draw support from conservative ethnic Mexicans as well. White liberals flocked to his camp, as did African Americans—including the SNAP activists. By practicing what later became known as “triangulating,” Gonzalez


\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{75} SNAP News, March 16, 1956, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 1, Folder 36, 4-5

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established his own base of power independent of both the GGL and the “liberal sector” of ethnic Mexicans.

Still, Gonzalez and Peña frequently collaborated, especially in these earliest days of ethnic Mexican political activism. In 1956, both men agreed to appear on a liberal Democratic slate, along with a third ethnic Mexican activist, Albert Treviño. LULAC’s poll tax and block walking campaigns represented the organizational core of the effort, but Gonzalez, as an outspoken City Councilman, brought it much-needed star power. Additionally, Peña’s previous unsuccessful campaign for state representative had proven that he already had a strong base of support on the racially-mixed Southside—an area he had carried handily.

On election day, all three candidates triumphed. Bolstered by broad support on the ethnic Mexican Westside and African American Eastside as well as among white liberals, Gonzalez became the first Mexican American State Senator in more than a century. Peña ran in a district election for a seat on the Bexar County Commissioners Court, representing parts of the Westside and Southside. Treviño was elected justice of the peace. All three campaigns successfully sidestepped municipal politics by focusing on district races they knew they could win.

San Antonio would never be the same.

Gonzalez and Peña recognized that African American voters generally and the SNAP activists in particular had contributed significantly to their success. Both politicians repaid their debt by making themselves visible on the Eastside and standing up for black civil rights once in office. For example, in 1957, Gonzalez came to the Eastside
to participate in dedication ceremonies for a new educational annex at Antioch Baptist Church.\(^{76}\) That same year, Albert Fuentes, who served as Peña’s chief of staff and proxy after the election, joined G. J. Sutton and Rev. Black on the directorate of the new “Political Action Group.” Fuentes became its second vice-chairman.\(^{77}\) Similarly, at Rev. Black’s “Bible Study Week” at Mt. Zion First Baptist Church in January, 1958, Peña attended one session and “spoke on the organizational features of the... Democrats of Texas.” (NAACP leader Harry Burns also gave an address.)\(^{78}\)

Both took stands against segregation in their official capacity as well. In 1957, along with State Senator Abraham Kazen, now-Senator Gonzalez famously filibustered for thirty-six hours in protest of ten new segregation laws proposed by conservative Democrats in the wake of the *Brown* decision. The filibuster killed eight of the ten bills. Eastside residents responded by inviting Henry B. to the 40\(^{th}\) Anniversary Dinner of the NAACP in February, 1958, and *SNAP* ran full-page ads and strong editorials in support of his longshot candidacy for governor later that year.\(^{79}\) Perhaps more significantly on the ground, in the spring of 1959, Commissioner Peña moved a resolution that ended discrimination in the awarding of county contracts for construction projects. The measure passed and became law.\(^{80}\)

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\(^{76}\) “Dedication Banquet,” *SNAP News*, September 27, 1957, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 1.

\(^{77}\) “Political Action Group,” *SNAP News*, May 24, 1957, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 1.

\(^{78}\) “Bible Study Week,” *SNAP News*, January 17, 1958, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 2.

\(^{79}\) “NAACP Anniversary Dinner,” *SNAP News*, undated 1958 (Campanella cover); “Why the Negro Can’t” and “Gonzales for Governor” display ad, *SNAP News*, July 25, 1958—all in SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 2.

\(^{80}\) “Court Ends Discrimination,” *SNAP News*, May 8, 1959, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 3.
The Final Pieces

The reciprocal relationship between Eastside activists and Peña’s “liberal sector” on the Westside slowly grew to become a permanent, formal partnership. Both groups had sporadically collaborated with white liberal Democrats, but these ties also became more intimate. Peña’s newfound status as an elected official gained him new clout that produced a heightened level of cooperation with white liberals and organized labor. Adding these final elements to the developing black-brown alliance would eventually produce a new institution, the Bexar County Democratic Coalition, founded in 1961. (Gonzalez remained independent, but he continued to draw upon and return coalition members’ support.)

The final, critical piece of the puzzle was the city’s predominately-white labor movement. G. J. Sutton and others in the barrios and ghettos had been organizing since the pecan sheller strike of 1938, and they had carried forward the idea and at times the practice of cooperation between African American and ethnic Mexican activists. So too had old white liberals like Maury Maverick, Sr., along with his protégés.

But organized labor, despite San Antonio’s relatively low union density, was the elephant in the room. It was reliably liberal on economic issues even as it remained tepid at best on civil rights. A labor endorsement gave liberal Democratic candidates of any color a chance. But when labor pragmatically supported conservatives in the all-important primaries, as it often did, the defeat of liberals was all but assured. Labor alone had the resources to mobilize large numbers of voters. While SNAP activists and Peña’s LULAC council had learned how to walk precincts and go door-to-door to get out the
vote with meager funding, labor could afford to buy endless block walkers. Its lobby also had some access to the halls of power, an asset that few African American and ethnic Mexican groups could boast.

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A trio of local labor struggles brought this final, critical leg into the coalition. Two of these campaigns recommitted and reconnected the newly-merged San Antonio AFL-CIO to large numbers of ethnic Mexican (and a few African American) workers to a degree not seen in decades. The third rallied white male craftsmen around a liberal leader who believed that organizing black and brown workers was the key to the labor movement’s success at the worksite and in electoral politics.

The first took place in 1957 at Friedrich Refrigerator, a relatively large factory with about a thousand employees in the heart of the Eastside. Despite the plant’s location, the shop floor was dominated by skilled German-American craftsmen. Yet several other ethnic groups joined them, albeit lower on the occupational hierarchy. The next group on the totem pole consisted of Polish descended workers, many of whom were unskilled, recent migrants from nearby farms, but some of whom shared cultural ties to the Germans. Ethnic Mexicans and African Americans occupied the bottom, laboring more or less side-by-side at unskilled manufacturing tasks. About half the workers plant-wide were ethnic Mexican women.81

In 1957, the International Union of Electrical, Machine, and Radio Workers (IUE), arrived in San Antonio and began to organize the Friedrich workers. The IUE had

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its origins in the Red Scare; the CIO chartered it in 1950 in order to raid the Communist-led United Electricalworkers. The newer IUE remained staunchly anti-Communist, but its raiding efforts depended upon emulating its rival on the shop floor. Its tactics mirrored those of the red UE—both unions’ efforts encouraged militant, rank and file led industrial unionism. And both unions encouraged interracial and inter-ethnic collaboration similar to that practiced by the AD Committee faction of Fort Worth packinghouse workers. In short, thanks to this unusual history, black and brown workers had a chance of inclusion in the new IUE.

The key rank and file organizer at Friedrich turned out to be a Polish farmer-turned-worker named Paul Javior. Like many small farmers in South Texas, Javior had learned to speak Spanish at a young age—despite the American conquest, Spanish remained the language of commerce in the region, connecting ranchers, farm workers, farmers, tenants, and merchants to one another. Javior’s native tongue was Polish, but he picked up English in school. His older brother, a driver for a nearby brewery, introduced him to both German culture and trade unionism. Javior began to work part time at the brewery, earning more in weeks on the job than the family cleared in an entire harvest. He finally left home to get a full-time job at the non-union but stable Friedrich Refrigerator, where his trilingual abilities and experience at the brewery allowed him to forge friendships across ethnic lines. At the same time, his rural upbringing and exclusion from old-stock Anglo and German cliques likely predisposed Javior to align himself with African American workers as well. So when the IUE showed up at the plant
gate, Javior was the right man to connect them to countless working people throughout the plant.

The most important connection he made was the recruitment of Ruth Harris, an ethnic “Mexican woman with an Anglo husband” who was a natural leader among the factory’s vast group of Mexicana workers. As the campaign grew to include a majority of the Friedrich employees, IUE organizers and rank and file leaders decided to “button up”—that is, to ask their supporters to announce the union’s presence by boldly wearing IUE buttons on to the shop floor. Naturally, many workers feared reprisals for displaying their sympathies, but Harris stood up at a union meeting and declared that she was ready to confront the boss. The hundreds of women who backed her followed her lead, while the men led by Javior accompanied them into the plant. The union’s display of such broad support made it obvious that it could win an NLRB-supervised representation election. In an unusual move for the period, Friedrich management accepted the union and negotiated its first contract without significant opposition or delay. Soon after, the members elected Harris to the post of Chief Steward, and Javior became an officer of the newly-formed Local 780. Both joined the IUE staff by the early 1960s.82

The IUE’s victory at Friedrich represented a landmark triumph for industrial union organizing in San Antonio. A few garment shops sporadically operated under union contracts, but these were typically small, fly-by-night concerns that closed soon after the union arrived. Most were monolithic in terms of workforce, relying entirely

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82 Javior, interviews by author.
upon ethnic Mexican women workers. But the arrival of the IUE, a large, diverse union was something new and unusual for San Antonio.

For the first time, a multiracial industrial union had secured a permanent foothold. For the next several decades the union hall on E. Commerce St. across from the factory would serve as a gathering place for union members, a launching pad for countless new organizing efforts, and a site for coalition building and contact with Eastside and Westside civil rights and political activists.

It also represented a potential new base for aspiring liberal politicians. Like most contemporary unions, the IUE asked its members to contribute voluntarily by check-off extra dues earmarked for electoral programs. But the IUE was unusual among unions in the period in that it continued to enjoy broad rank and file participation it all its activities even after the original organizing and contract campaigns. Local 780 provided dollars, bodies, and above all block walkers for the San Antonio AFL-CIO. And perhaps most importantly, its leaders brought the relatively radical vision of interracial cooperation forged on the shop floor to the labor movement as a whole. In the years to come it would provide consistent votes for the growing multiracial coalition spearheaded by G. J. Sutton, Albert Peña, and various white labor and liberal activists.

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The second major union campaign that contributed to the rise of a multiracial liberal coalition took place at Tex-Son, a garment factory of three to four hundred workers located just north of downtown. The struggle at the Tex-Son garment factory has received relatively extensive attention from scholars, but its wider context and
connections to broader labor, civil rights, and political activism still remains largely unexamined.

The basic facts are pretty well established. The mostly ethnic Mexican women who worked at Tex-Son had enjoyed representation by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) for two decades before they walked off the job in 1959. That year, the shop’s owners, Harold and Emanuel Franzel, hired Theo Weiss, an attorney and president of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce and a well-known union buster. When the union’s contract expired, Weiss headed the company’s negotiations team and flatly refused to bargain.

The union went out on strike in February, 1959, and violent conflicts between Mexicana strikers and scabs soon filled the pages of the city’s newspapers, leading to calls for order and eventually the arrest and harassment of countless strikers by local police. The union responded with outrage, parading the local’s rank and file leaders in front of the court of public opinion by ceaselessly displaying their maternal, ladylike, and fashionable qualities. Scholarly accounts of the conflict disagree on the causes behind and meaning of the union’s portrayal of strikers as Cold War era mothers being ruthlessly attacked by unscrupulous bosses who hired violent strikebreakers with the full support of the law. Irene Ledesma argues that the predominately male union leadership misrepresented and essentialized these working women, suggesting that their insistence upon an image of motherhood precluded recognizing the women as militant workers who possessed their own agency and were thus capable of leading and sustaining a long-term fight. The women’s full potential was underutilized, crippling the strike from the
beginning and contributing to its eventual defeat. White and male unionists offered their solidarity, but only in paternalistic terms. Finally, the international union pulled the plug on the strikers by cutting off their financial aid. Still, as many as a hundred women heroically remained on the picket line for the next two years until the factory closed its doors.  

In contrast, Lori Flores contends that the strikers themselves adopted the maternalist image as a strategic response to negative press coverage and a concerted appeal to Cold War ideologies of domesticity. In this version, the *Mexicana* women played a critical role in determining the strike’s strategy, supported by the few Anglo women workers at the plant, ILGWU organizers, male trade unionists, and local ethnic Mexican politicians. Although the union could have done more to support the strike (she does not specify how), the real cause of the strike’s failure was the Franzels’ successful outsourcing of union work, hiring of scabs, and the general anti-union, right-to-work climate of 1950s Texas.  

Both renderings of the Tex-Son strike center on gendered analyses of the union’s rhetoric and reaction, and the evidence certainly merits the scholarly attention to this theme. Both are primarily monoethnic in scope. Yet because of these areas of emphasis, neither account adequately situates the struggle in relation to the broader, long, multiracial history of labor activism in Texas. Nor do existing studies link the strike to

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the rapidly developing liberal electoral coalition at this precise moment in San Antonio and Texas (though Flores is much more attentive to the importance of the broad-based support for the strikers).

A closer look reveals that the Tex-Son strike drew strength from, and contributed to the development of the statewide struggle for democracy, in several significant ways. The Texas director of the ILGWU at the time of the conflict was none other than George Lambert, the longtime labor, civil rights, and political organizer who had participated in virtually every major campaign in Texas since the Ford beatings of 1937 and the pecan sheller uprising of 1938. With Lambert at the helm, the union launched a massive boycott of Tex-Son products that brought unprecedented exposure to the travails of the ethnic Mexican working people at the bottom of the state’s economy. Both he and his wife Latane were intimately involved in the flowering multiracial electoral coalition, laboring in positions that helped the strikers win especially strong and public support from the predominately-white San Antonio AFL-CIO Council and civil rights attorney turned County Commissioner Albert Peña. The Tex-Son strike and boycott also coincided with the third major labor struggle of the period—a general strike by white union craftsmen—as well as the continued rise of San Antonio’s liberal Democratic clubs and the career of Henry B. Gonzalez.

It is only through this wider lens that the full picture becomes clear. The Tex-Son strike grew into a cause célèbre not simply because of the Mexicana women workers’ courage and tenacity in the face of violent and prolonged opposition. It did so due to its
particular timing, location, staffing, and above all its close relationship to the rapidly-expanding coalition-building efforts that surrounded it.

The presence of the Lamberts in San Antonio during the Tex-Son strike represents more than a coincidence. Both had worked with various garment and clothing worker unions since they met in North Carolina in 1937, and they brought their decades of combined experience in the trenches of stolidly anti-union Texas to bear during the Tex-Son struggle. After seventeen years in Dallas working for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the NAACP, the DOT and the ADA, the couple returned to San Antonio in October, 1957, when George became the staffer for the joint council of the city’s ILGWU locals. In this capacity, Lambert led the internal organizing efforts that preceded the public act of striking Tex-Son and then coordinated the behind-the-scenes campaign to gain support for the workers and win the protracted conflict. Most critically, Lambert managed the “Don’t Buy Tex-Son” boycott that lay at the heart of the union’s solidarity organizing and long-term strategy.

Thanks to their long-term activism, both Lamberts were keenly aware of the stakes of the Tex-Son strike. They would have agreed with brewery worker George Eichler, the head of the San Antonio AFL-CIO Council, who aptly summarized the historic nature of the conflict on the one year anniversary of the strike: “it has become a

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85 Ledesma scarcely mentions George Lambert and neglects Latane entirely. Flores characterizes George Lambert as “an important leader and friend to the women of Tex-Son,” and she briefly notes his long history of activism and participation in the earlier uprising. Yet she still overlooks the role of both Lamberts as liberal political organizers and NAACP members in Dallas in the 1950s. (Ironically, Latane appears in Flores’ account in a purely supportive, subordinate spousal role—obscuring her own work as a labor organizer and political activist dating back to the late 1930s.) Flores, "An Unladylike Strike,” 378, 391.

key struggle in the battle of vicious anti-labor forces in this community to further weaken the Labor Movement in Texas.” At the local level, the Lambert knew that while they were in Dallas, San Antonio Chamber of Commerce president Theo Weiss had been hard at work waging war against the ILGWU. Weiss had busted the union and destroyed four other locals since 1953. One small union local at the Bernhard Altmann Company had won a short strike in 1957, but it too was on Weiss’ hit list. Tex-Son remained as the lone sizable union holdout, one of the few in the entire South, and Weiss had convinced its owners to dig in their heels—even as they began “farm[ing] out” work to non-union factories in Mississippi. Both the future of labor in Texas and the garment union’s survival were very much up in the air.

The gravity of the situation compelled George to develop a strategy capable of winning a protracted strike against immovable opponents. Likely recalling the pecan sheller movement of 1938, Lambert devised an approach that centered on rank and file participation and leadership. As early as the fall of 1958, he began assembling a negotiating committee composed of and led by Mexicana workers in the plant. The committee, in turn, recruited new members to the union and mobilized them for a

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89 Lambert’s past primarily represented an asset to the Garment Workers’ campaign, though in at least one instance it served as a possible liability. Paul Thompson, a conservative columnist for the San Antonio News, flagged Lambert’s radical political sympathies and arrest record at the top of one of his editorials six months into the strike. Thompson noted that Lambert was arrested “‘six or seven times’ in 1938 for disturbing the peace” during the “hectic pecan shellers’ strike,” and he noted the organizer’s ties to then-Communist strike leader Emma Tenayuca. “Police said he [Lambert] was not a member of the Communist Party,” Thompson added, “although they accused him of being a fellow traveler.” To his credit, Thompson also included Lambert’s reply to these charges of guilt-by-association: Lambert told the columnist, “If anyone tries to drag a Communist red herring into this [Tex-Son] strike, I believe I can cram it down his throat.” Paul Thompson, “Top of the News” column, San Antonio News, August 18, 1959, in Lambert Papers AR127-25-7.
unanimous strike vote, and the committee quickly took charge when the walkout began the following February. In May 1959, as the conflict continued, Lambert worked with the local president and strike committee head Gregoria Montalbo to form a delegation of workers to give a presentation on their struggle to the international convention of the ILGWU in Miami. He also helped her prepare her speech to convention.\(^90\)

Rank and file union leadership rarely springs forth spontaneously, and it is frequently repressed or overshadowed by high-level union bureaucrats when it does. Yet Lambert remained committed to fostering ordinary workers’ activism up until the strike’s bitter end. Rather than steal the spotlight from Montalbo at the Miami convention, Lambert organized a delegation of rank and file workers to represent themselves. He confined his own activities to behind-the-scenes work, producing a rough cut, silent version of the short film that would later circulate in union halls across the country (and receive much scholarly commentary), “Mother is On Strike.”\(^91\)

At the same time, Lambert understood the importance of winning outside support for the strike, and he drew upon his personal relationships with local labor and political leaders to win unprecedented public endorsements and financial assistance for the union. The city’s labor and liberal movements, in turn, were revitalized by the garment workers’ struggle. George Eichler’s Brewery Workers union and the San Antonio AFL-CIO Council both became key supporters of the strikers, as did many of the council’s member unions. So too did Commissioner Albert Peña. Optimism abounded from all corners on


\(^{91}\) *ibid.*
March 14, 1959, three weeks into the strike, when “More than 1000 marchers, representing 60 union locals” from across the city staged a parade that began at the Labor Temple and ended in a rally in front of the Alamo. Speakers encouraged the strikers and highlighted the struggle’s larger implications. The national AFL-CIO’s assistant organizing director, Franz Daniel, told the crowd that workers must at times strike for their own “self-respect.” In the process, he added, they could be personally transformed: “You will discover capabilities that you never thought you had...It will change your entire way of life... Let no man, no kind of propaganda make you waver one bit.” Father Sherrill Smith, assistant pastor of Mission Espada and a community liaison for the Catholic Archdiocese in San Antonio, added that workers had a “moral right” to strike. But it was Albert Peña who set the marchers’ sights directly on San Antonio’s business elites and the larger stakes of political power and economic opportunity in the city and state. “I do not agree with the Chamber of Commerce philosophy that the way to attract industry to San Antonio is to make it a low wage town,” Peña told the one thousand assembled union members and supporters. “I will fight any effort, any movement to keep San Antonio a cheap labor town.” He added, as one daily newspaper writer paraphrased him, that “union members were witnessing a rebirth of the labor movement in San Antonio.” The liberal weekly Texas Observer agreed: “The labor movement of San Antonio came alive in a way it has not demonstrated for at least twenty years...” Perhaps the clearest indication of the truth of such observations was a photograph of the march that appeared in the daily San Antonio Light the day after the march. In it, a downtown street is filled with marchers carrying signs proclaiming various unions’ support for the
Tex-Son strikers. The IUE members from Fredrich Refrigerator, a multiracial group whose organizing victory two years earlier represented a major coup for the city’s labor movement, dominate the foreground of the image.\textsuperscript{92}

Labor movement support for the garment workers remained broad and significant throughout the strike. In August, 1959, six months into the strike, Eichler jumped at the opportunity to use the international convention of the Brewery Workers being held in San Antonio to stage another demonstration of solidarity. State and local laws, enforced by police harassment and upheld in local courts, had temporarily restricted the picketing activities of the Tex-Son strikers. The Brewery Workers responded by leaving their convention site and picketing the factory on the strikers’ behalf. One paper reported that “A jeering, singing mob of 350 International Union of Brewery Workers convention delegates” attempted to keep scabs out of the plant. City police again cracked down on the pickets, this time arresting the president of a Philadelphia local and the international union’s general counsel. Both were “released without charges, and received official apologies the next day”—actions that indicate the relative power and respect given to white, skilled, male craft workers by local authorities and underscoring the significance of this group’s support for unskilled Mexicana industrial workers.\textsuperscript{93} In another stunning example of solidarity, the Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, local unit of the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (C.T.M.), the Mexican counterpart to the AFL-CIO, hung a


banner over the international port of entry urging Mexican citizens to avoid scabbing at Tex-Son or purchasing the struck company’s products while visiting the U.S. One Nuevo Laredo newspaper responded to the violence surrounding the strike by headlining a story “Salvajismo Contra Mujeres”—“Savagery Against Women.”

While labor unions in two countries rallied behind them, Lambert and the strike committee coordinated rank and file participation on the picket line and launched a massive boycott campaign. Throughout the summer and fall, Tex-Son workers descended on area department stores in order to ask retailers to stop selling the company’s products. When businesses refused, they launched informational pickets outside the stores, distributing handbills that informed consumers of the strike and asked them to refrain from buying Tex-Son clothes. Their tactics generally worked. By September, nine months into the strike, boycott campaign chairman Rinaldo Panetta reported that nearly two hundred stores, including more than eighty in Texas, had removed Tex-Son products from their shelves. Some 200 more stores had agreed to refrain from re-ordering Tex-Son clothes until the strike was settled. Panetta appealed to union members nation-wide to meet again with local retailers in their cities to deliver the union’s message ahead of the annual visits by Tex-Son’s traveling salesmen. Panetta also appealed directly to the retailers.

Workers alternated between picketing the factory and distributing leaflets downtown, constantly reinventing their strategy as Tex-Son and the company’s business

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94 Dugger, “A Garment Strike,” 2; Flores, 392; Ledesma diss, 174.
95 Rinaldo Panetta to Sir and Brother, September 15, 1959; Panetta to All Retailers of Children’s Wear, September 21, 1959; Paul Thompson, “Top of the News” column, San Antonio News, August 18, 1959—all in Lambert Papers, AR127-25-7. See also, Dugger, “A Garment Strike,” 1.
and law enforcement allies sought to contain the conflict. Efforts to stage informational pickets at Joske’s, a high end department store in San Antonio, represent a case in point. In July, 1959, city police arrested Lambert and twenty-one strikers as they distributed handbills outside the store. With television and radio reporters looking on, the union used the incident as a chance for free public relations. Police claimed that the hand billing violated both the federal Landrum-Griffin Act that restricted secondary boycotts as well as the state O’Daniel law that prohibited mass picketing. Lambert consulted with the unions’ attorneys and lobbied the international union for permission to continue “mass hand billing” despite the arrests. Several months later, Tex-Son workers returned to Joske’s, this time carrying helium balloons with the “Don’t Buy” slogan. Strikers handed the balloons to children as they entered the store with their parents and then often released them once inside, letting them float to the ceiling and thereby allowing the union to bring their message not only in front of but inside the department store. The workers also solicited nearly 500 letters from Joske’s customers asking the company to remove the Tex-Son line.96

Strikers carried the boycott to other cities in Texas and beyond, where they experienced a mixture of resistance (including police harassment and arrest) and cooperation from retailers. Foley’s department store in Houston filed unfair labor practice charges against the union after a group of “union seamen, electricians, and

garments workers‖ staged an informational picket in front of the store. Countless other retailers used every tool available to scare the pickets away. Others readily cooperated, including one that depended upon union members. An ILGWU staffer reported that Best Taylor’s in Houston was one such case: the retailer “Says, get me off your list in a hurry. . . His business is near the NMU hall and does business for the Seamen.” The strikers also visited stores in San Antonio and beyond, checked their inventories for Tex-Son attire, and reported their findings back to Lambert. As the company increasingly outsourced more and more work to low-wage subcontractors in Mississippi and throughout the South, members of Lambert’s staff and striking workers followed the money and set up boycotts and solidarity pickets in front of the factories doing Tex-Son work in the most remote of locales, places where organized labor scarcely had a presence at all. Members of the ILGWU in faraway states staged pickets of their own to compel local retailers and branches of chains to drop Tex-Son products.97

While the boycott sought to financially strain the company, Lambert and the strikers faced fiscal problems of their own as the strike wore on. They repeatedly reached out to and received support from a wide variety of sources—those that responded, unsurprisingly, also represented key players in the city and state’s growing liberal political coalition. As Secretary of the San Antonio AFL-CIO Council, George Eichler represented one of the strikers’ most influential and deep-pocketed supporters. In

addition to orchestrating the massive March, 1959, parade, and the brewery workers’ action in August of that year, Eichler made repeated calls for local unions to offer financial contributions to the strikers and support the boycott. Even after the ILGWU international union pulled its support for the strike in late November 1960, Eichler asked each of the Council’s member locals to adopt one of the 80 remaining strikers who “have carried on a magnificent battle for more than 19 months against one of the most rabidly anti-union employers in San Antonio” and still remained on the picket line even without strike pay.98 Three months later in February 1961, local union and strike committee president Gregoria Montalbo credited the Eichler’s Council and the Texas State AFL-CIO with providing the critical financial support needed to continue the strike.99 And as Christmas approached in 1962—some two years after strike benefits had ceased—the San Antonio Council again voted to donate an additional $50 to the thirteen Tex-Son strikers who remained on the picket line, blacklisted from local employment and still determined to win.100

Of course, the fact that local unions contributed financially to the Tex-Son strike is not unique in the annals of labor history. Union members frequently donated to other locals’ strike funds and were often asked to respected picket lines and boycott products of unfair employers. Yet the conflict at Tex-Son remains unusual: it was an atypically long struggle, it was waged and led by ethnic Mexican women workers, and it happened in a

98 George Eichler to All Locals, Lodges and Auxiliaries, December 23, 1960, Lambert Papers, AR127-25-7.
place that had grown unaccustomed to militant labor conflicts. It likely represented the first time that local AFL unions had supported *Mexicana* strikers, and it certainly was the first example in which the local labor movement had continued to support local workers years after their own international union had abandoned them.

In short, the Tex-Son strike had fulfilled Albert Peña’s prediction that it would re-energize the city’s labor movement, even as it failed to protect the union members who walked off the job. In so doing, the struggle also deepened the ties between organized labor and the city’s leading liberal political leaders and civil rights activists. Of course, Peña was involved in the strike from the beginning. He connected the union to his brother and law partner Richard Peña, who served as the union’s primary attorney for the first ten months of the strike. The practicing attorney’s tasks included countless court appearances and paying bond fees for arrested workers—including on at least one instance twenty women arrested for mass picketing on a single day.101

When the international union cut off benefits in November 1960, local committee leader Montalbo asked Commissioner Peña to visit the union hall to meet with the *Mexicana* workers who wished to continue the strike. George Lambert also attended the meeting, though he reported that his presence was “completely accidental.” In a letter to his superior, regional director Fred Siems, Lambert noted that the committee members “were determined to keep the strike going and asked his [Peña’s] help in interceding with the ILGWU and with other unions in getting them some financial support.” The fact that the strikers appealed to Peña is itself telling—the civil rights lawyer turned politician had

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become a passionate supporter of labor rights and likely represented many of the women workers on the County Commission. He represented a dependable ally capable of advocating for their interests even as the union bureaucracy seemingly turned its back on them. Still, Peña appealed to Lambert’s expertise at the meeting. The union organizer reported to Siems:

Peña asked for my opinion. I told him and the Committee that I could see no hope that the strike could be won, that the International had decided it was a lost strike and had for that reason withdrawn financial support and that I could see no purpose in making any effort to continue it. Peña said that to the contrary he felt that the loss of the Tex-Son strike would be a serious blow to the entire labor movement here and particularly to the chances of Latin-American workers organizing and improving their living standards. He told the Committee that he would do everything he could, including getting them out of jail at no charge if need be, to help them as long as they wanted to keep the strike going.\(^\text{102}\)

Despite Lambert’s opposition, Montalbo and the committee asked Peña to write a letter to appeal to ILGWU President David Dubinsky.\(^\text{103}\)

\(^{102}\) Letter from Lambert to Fred Siems, November 29, 1960, 1 (both quotations; page 2 is missing from the file), Lambert Papers, AR127-12-2. Flores quotes a September, 20, 1960, letter to international president David Dubinsky from about thirty self-proclaimed members of the union as evidence that the strikers had grown suspicious of Lambert and Sophie Gonzales, another organizer. Yet the full text of the letter reveals that the signers were not committee members but rank and file workers who were upset that their strike benefits had been reduced by 25% since they had begun working elsewhere. Montalbo’s name does not appear among the signatories. The letter also highlights the role of Rebecca Taylor, a union organizer who had recently quit to join the human resources staff at Tex-Son. Lambert and Gonzales had long distrusted Taylor and certainly weren’t in bed with her after she quit. While many of the details remain murky, and Flores seems to have overstated the letter’s meaning in relation to Lambert and Gonzales, it is clear that at least some of the strikers had grown impatient or distrustful of the union bureaucracy, as I’ve put it. Yet both the thirty-odd members and the strike committee appealed to Dubinsky as the ultimate arbiter, thereby legitimizing his role. Flores, 396; Letter from Local 180 Members to Dubinsky in Lambert Papers, AR127-25-7.

\(^{103}\) Still, Peña cited the meeting and Lambert’s presence in his letter. Letter from Albert A. Peña, Jr., to David Dubinsky, November 25, 1960, Lambert Papers AR127-12-2. It appears that Lambert attempts to distance himself from the strike committee’s action and Peña’s appeal in his letter to Siems, in all likelihood to cover his own rear end. Yet Lambert remained active in the strike for another year, and he continued to work for Peña and Gonzalez in the political arena. Latane Lambert also served alongside Peña as officers of the Bexar County Democrats, so it’s unlikely that there was any bad blood between the two men. Letter from George Lambert to Siems, November 29, 1960, Lambert Papers, AR127-12-2; Letter
Peña did so the following week. His letter was reprinted the following week in the San Antonio AFL-CIO Weekly Dispatch, along with a new preface. Peña’s words underscore his commitment to the strike and to labor and working-class struggles generally. “I met with the ladies of the Tex-Son strike committee last week,” he began.

Faced with a bleak and cold Christmas, hardship, abuse, jail, the committee agreed to continue the picket line. I have known many men with less courage and few men with more courage. If the Tex-Son strike dies, it will die hard—to the last agonizing breath. And if the Tex-Son strike dies, every man and woman in the labor movement in San Antonio will die a little, too.

His entreaty to Dubinsky was direct and highlighted not only the conflict at hand but the future implications of defeat. A lost strike at Tex-Son stood to undermine his daily organizing work and the future of the coalition. “I appeal to you in behalf of working people in general in the city of San Antonio who are paid the lowest wage scale of any large city in the United States,” Peña writes. “I appeal to you because if this strike fails people like me will have a very difficult time selling the union movement to the vast majority of people in our town. And Unions are needed so desperately here.”

While Eichler’s and Peña’s unflinching support contributed to the tightening bonds between organized labor and liberals, both white and ethnic Mexican, so too did the Lamberts’ ongoing political activism link the strike to the rising liberal political coalition in San Antonio. Although only fragmentary evidence is available, it is clear that Latane in particular focused on precinct-level organizing and county-wide relationship

from Lambert to All Delegates and Guests, Texas State AFL-CIO Convention, July 30, 1961, Lambert Papers, AR127-25-7.

104 “If Tex-Son Strike Dies, Every San Antonio Union Man Dies a Little, Too,” AFL-CIO Weekly Dispatch, December 9, 1960, 1, in Lambert Papers, AR127-25-7; Letter from Peña to Dubinsky, AR127-12-2.
building, moving beyond the worksite to the conflict’s larger electoral implications. She quickly became the corresponding secretary of the Bexar County Democrats, a liberal group chaired by Peña that also included liberal Anglo judge Charlie Grace and several labor leaders. In May of 1960, Latane, Peña, and African American activist G. J. Sutton helped coordinate the liberal group’s takeover of the Democratic Party’s county convention. Latane and George Lambert both served as block walkers and on-the-ground coordinators for Henry B. Gonzalez’s campaigns as he was reelected to the State Senate in 1960 and then to the U.S. Congress in a special election in 1961, when Latane also helped run the Democratic Party headquarters. Gonzalez reciprocated by actively supporting the garment workers’ union. By February of 1962, Latane had become the secretary of the Bexar County Democratic Coalition (see chapter four) as well as the coordinator of the organization’s all-important poll tax and get-out-the-vote committees.105

George and Latane Lambert’s involvement in the strike, boycott, and political action that followed was anything but tangential to the real story. Rather, the longtime activists connected the Tex-Son struggle to the blossoming local labor/liberal coalition, the members of which sustained the strikers in unprecedented ways. For the first time, male white craft workers led by Eichler supported a strike of predominately ethnic

Mexican, women workers. They made common cause with the daughters of the pecan shellers and firebrand civil rights activists Peña and Sutton. The Tex-Son strike revitalized a moribund local labor movement and cemented the pieces of the city’s multiracial liberal/labor political coalition. By focusing narrowly on the strikers themselves, including the gendered (self-) representations of the women workers, historians have inadvertently overlooked this forest for the trees. The three-year Tex-Son strike and boycott should be remembered not simply as a heroic act of courageous but marginal workers, nor simply as a transitional moment in Chicano/a and women’s activism. Clearly it is all of those things. But it is also a watershed in the development of a unitary movement for democracy in San Antonio and across Texas, a moment when a small local conflict helped engender a permanent coalition that would, in turn, transform the state’s political and economic history.

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In fact, the Tex-Son strike coincided with another massive strike, one that is completely absent from mono-ethnic histories of San Antonio labor and politics. Yet while historians have focused exclusively on the Mexicana garment workers, contemporary observers presented them side-by-side—quite literally, in the case of the Texas Observer, which ran a front-page story on the strike of San Antonio’s building trades right next to a piece on Tex-Son (the paper also ran a biographical sketch of the craftsmen’s leader alongside a parallel work on George Lambert).106

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106 “Texas Labor 1959,” is the front-page feature, which also includes a third piece on “Other Strikes” around the state. “Labor Leaders at the Picket Line” includes the two biographical sketches cited in this chapter: “An Idealist Bound to be Useful,” on Lambert, and “A Man Who Needs Tangible Results,” on
As noted previously, labor was the golden goose for the city’s emerging multiracial liberal coalition. The man who delivered it was a plumber named H. S. “Hank” Brown. Brown was born in 1920 and raised in the Ohio River Valley. His father was a shop floor leader in the Amalgamated Tin, Iron, and Steel Workers, the old-stock all-white craft union that had infamously fallen victim to Carnegie Steel’s Pinkerton squads in the Homestead strike of 1892. As a child during the Depression, Hank accompanied his dad on summer trips to West Virginia, living in miners’ camps as they began organizing industrial unions even before the formation of the CIO. In 1936, Brown left home and began to roam, riding trains and living in “hobo jungles” as far away as Florida before returning to Appalachia to join the John L. Lewis’ United Mine Workers. The militant union president who spearheaded the “real movement” in the mountains served as Brown’s role model, a man who he later recalled did more for the people of that region than anyone before or since.107

Brown continued to wander before arriving in San Antonio in 1939. He got a job as a laborer at an open plumbing shop and soon became a helper. Yet his growing skills (and white skin) still did not gain him entrée to the exclusive Plumbers and Steam Fitters’ Union. A tight-knit “old German clan” controlled the local unit and passed down the craft from generation to generation. Probably coincidentally, Hank courted and married Sophie Weigman, the daughter and sister of two German union plumbers. But marrying

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into the clan still did not make him a son, he later recalled. He worked on a permit until 1943, when a wartime labor shortage and new local leadership finally allowed him to become a full member. He was promptly drafted into the army.\textsuperscript{108}

When he returned to San Antonio in 1945, Brown quickly rose through the union ranks, becoming the Plumbers’ Business Agent in 1946 and a delegate to the local Building Trades Council and the Texas State Federation of Labor (TSFL) soon thereafter. All three posts taught him new lessons. Still just twenty-six years old, Hank learned experientially about bread-and-butter labor issues, parliamentary procedure, and electoral politics. Sometime in the 1940s, he later remembered, the plumbers picketed a builder named H.B. Zachary, who was putting up housing projects. When a group of carpenters crossed the picket line and continued to work, several plumbers, including Brown, stormed in on their meeting and “went down there and stomped hell out of a bunch of them, and set an example that it wasn’t healthy to be contributing to scabbing on us when we were fighting for what we believed was righteousness and justice.” Brown recalled that the issue was quickly resolved, in contrast to later disputes that were resolved through the grievance procedure or in the courts.\textsuperscript{109}

Around the same time, Brown also cut his teeth in the Democratic Party. He served as the “quote-unquote” county manager for liberal professor Homer Rainey’s 1946 gubernatorial campaign and worked for Truman in 1948. At the dawn of the 1950s, Brown found even more time to commit to electoral politics, serving as chair of Labor’s League for Political Education and working in collaboration with Struge Steinart,

\textsuperscript{108} Brown interview by author, 7:55-11:05; Brown interview by Green, 4.
\textsuperscript{109} Brown interview by Green, 29-30; Brown interview by author, 13:50.
Kathleen Voigt, and other white liberals in the newly-formed Democrats of Texas.\textsuperscript{110} He recalled:

It was a good time, there was a lot of work, so you didn’t have a lot of unemployed people breathing down your collar, so you could spend a hour or two here and there working in politics. And it all related back, of course, to your members because if you don’t have a friendly city council and a friendly county council or commissioners court…it shows up on the workers. So it’s important that we be involved all the way to the precinct all the way to the white house. I’ve believed that ever since I was involved back with John L. Lewis and my dad.\textsuperscript{111}

Brown also “began to work with some of the Mexican-American leaders, [and] some of the Negro leaders, and that was my first involvement with a kind of coalition.”\textsuperscript{112}

Brown did right by his members in the Plumbers union as well as the growing liberal wing of the Democratic Party, which he began connecting to the city’s black and brown activists. But he left town just as his efforts began to bear fruit. In 1952, as a young district vice-president of the TSFL, Hank ran for the federation’s presidency but narrowly lost. A year later the state body’s Executive Secretary Jerry Holleman hired Brown as his assistant. Hank recalled that he later got a “fancy title as Education Director” but “Actually, I was a cook and bottle-washer and did whatever had to be done.” That year he also served as the TSFL’s “leg man” in the state legislature, leading labor’s lobbying effort in the capitol.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{110} Brown interview by author, 14:45, 18:40, 21:50; Brown interview by Green, 5-6.
\textsuperscript{111} Brown interview by author, 17:35.
\textsuperscript{113} Brown interview by Green, 5.
Still, the “education” part of his title was far from an empty epithet. Brown began touring the state offering seminars to local labor councils. The workshops taught both union and political skills, offering training that was especially needed in the “boondocks” of East Texas, the Rio Grande Valley, and the faraway Panhandle. By visiting two labor councils per month, Brown was able to canvass all of the far-flung locales over the course of a year. He spread news of the latest legislative developments, shared stories of his experiences in the electoral field in San Antonio and Austin, and asked each delegate to add extra political contributions on top of their dues. He also got his name and face in front of countless union members statewide while simultaneously continuing his own experiential education.114

Brown’s star was clearly rising, but a twist of fate sent him back to San Antonio and directed his energies back into the Bexar County’s Democratic Party. Following the merger of the TSFL and the Texas State CIO Council in 1957, Secretary Holleman slashed Brown’s education program budget, and Hank also clashed with another federation officer. He returned to the Alamo City to discover that his old local’s business agent had become an ineffectual drunk. The union’s membership, which had tripled during his tenure as business agent, had also contracted. Hank assembled a team of officers, stood for election, and promptly returned to the local’s leadership in 1959. Brown remembered that the union’s relations to local contractors had also deteriorated, and that combined with the “Eisenhower economy” had brought wages to a recent low. The union’s members voted overwhelmingly to go on strike, and over four hundred

114 Brown interview by author, 21:50, 22:15. Also see Brown’s correspondence in the Texas AFL-CIO Papers, Executive Board series, AR110-1, TLA-UTA.
walked off the job on August 3, 1959. The sheet-metal workers union quickly joined them. The employers responded by shutting down their operations across the city, effectively locking out the workers in hopes of ending the strike. By early September, Brown estimated that the strike had already cost $125,000 in lost wages, $250,000 in lost revenue for the employers, and $500,000 to the public in delays of construction. The union itself lost $4,000 per month in dues while doubling its operating expenses. The *Observer* reported that the strike brought the city’s construction industry to “a virtual standstill,” a condition that only got worse when five additional trades joined the walkout in early October.\textsuperscript{115}

Like the leaders and supporters of the Tex-Son union, Brown believed that labor was at a crossroads during the tumultuous strikes of 1959.\textsuperscript{116} Although wages and slack time were the immediate causes of the craftsmen’s strike, the conflict also raised larger questions surrounding the city’s method of economic development and distribution of political power. Echoing Albert Peña’s speech at the Alamo, Brown told the *Texas Observer* that three factors combined to keep San Antonio a “low-wage town”: the presence of large federal employers that prohibited collective bargaining (until the early

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{115} Brown interview by author, 24:00-28:20; Ronnie Dugger, “Craftsmen Go Out,” *Texas Observer*, September 4, 1959, 1-2; Ronnie Dugger, “A Man Who Needs Tangible Results,” *Texas Observer*, September 4, 1959, 3; “More Crafts Join S.A. Strike,” *Texas Observer*, October 2, 1959, 2. In his interview with the author, Brown recalled wages reaching a low of $90 per week. The *Observer* cites Brown saying that actual wages were $105 per week, while the contractors claimed to be paying $140. Both sides of the conflict agreed that hourly wages were $3.49 prior to the strike.
  \item \textsuperscript{116} There is no direct evidence that he participated in the Tex-Son struggle, though he remembered the strike clearly and almost surely would have supported the garment workers and joined their picket lines or mass demonstrations on at least one occasion. Brown interview by author, 28:20.
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1960s), the lack of heavy industry or large manufacturing concerns, and “the overabundance of cheap labor that normally is available—Latin-American, primarily.”

As a member of an exclusive craft union, Brown could have responded to these challenges by circling the wagons, narrowly protecting his membership, and blaming the low-wage workers for the city’s economic woes. Yet Brown took the opposite approach. “Everybody has a right to make a decent living,” he said. The Observer adds:

“The solution to all of this,” Brown said, “is the organization of the Latin-American people, of this unskilled labor pool,” day laborers, janitors, maids, elevator operators, department and grocery store clerks, “all those dollar-an-hour-and-less jobs. Unless this job is done by the trade union movement, the organization of the unskilled and semiskilled workers, this town will always be a low-wage town,” he said.

Brown’s expansive understanding of the labor movement’s challenges and future responses might initially appear marginal to his time and place, yet Brown kept getting elected to run his union’s affairs. As other trades joined the strike, he became their spokesman too. He quite literally represented San Antonio’s union craftsmen—an all-white, all-male constituency of so-called “labor aristocrats.” In the fall of 1959, they lined up behind Brown and hit the streets to demand a fair share of the “Eisenhower economy” while simultaneously marching in lock-step with low-wage, unskilled, non-white industrial workers. “It’s a rough fight. A good fight,” he stated one month into the strike. “We’ll win it, but it’s gonna take a while.”

After thirteen weeks, the contractors caved to Brown’s demands and agreed to a wage hike, the establishment of apprenticeship program, and a new pension fund. Still,

118 Ibid (both quotations).
119 Ibid.
Brown kept the plumbers home until the builders’ associations also settled with the remaining, less-powerful trades, including the unskilled, non-white Laborers and Hod Carriers union. The entire struggle lasted four months and eighteen days.\footnote{Brown interview by author, 24:00-28:20; “13-Week Strike Is Ended Here,” \textit{San Antonio Express}, November 4, 1959, 1.} Solidarity across trades and a desire to organize the un-organized low-wage labor pool underlay its success. Asked about his philosophy in a 1971 oral history interview, Brown recalled: “I guess I have always been a blend of an industrial union guy with a childhood background of steelworker—coal mining—who just accidentally got into the plumbing business and became a union craftsman.”\footnote{Brown interview by Green, 31.}

With his own house back in order, Brown immediately returned his attention to electoral politics, a field that centered upon building relationships with the growing liberal factions in the city’s ethnic Mexican, African American, and white communities. To be sure, organizing efforts on Sutton’s Eastside and Peña’s Westside had continued unabated during Brown’s long absence from the Alamo City. Yet it was the renewal of a small but militant labor movement that reached both those predominately non-white neighborhoods and the white, male, skilled craftsmen that finally allowed the nascent electoral alliance to coalesce.

**Conclusion: Eve of a New Coalition**

In November, 1959, members of the Texas AFL-CIO from across the state converged on San Antonio for their annual convention. Among the assembled delegates were dozens of black, brown, and white activists who had waged local struggles for
democracy and civil rights over the past two decades, including Mary Salinas of the Packinghouse Workers in Fort Worth; Pancho Medrano, Franklin Garcia, and Elnora Purcell of the UAW near Dallas; C. E. Gauthier of the Houston Laborers Local 18 (Freeman Everett and Jimmie Middleton’s union); Willis Beale of the projectionists’ union (Lee Lewis’s local); Paul Montemayor and Oscar Reyna of the Corpus Christi Steelworkers; and San Antonio’s own plumber Hank Brown; brewery worker George Eichler; Willie Maldonado of the Laborers; Paul Javior, Ruth Harris, and Cedric Gamboa of the IUE at Fredrich Refrigerator; and Gertrude Hartung of the ILGWU Tex-Son Local 180. Father Sherrill Smith, who had joined the Tex-Son march at the Alamo, offered the invocation.  

As the building trades and garment workers continued their strikes, Albert Peña welcomed the delegates with a rousing speech that looked to both the past and future of the labor movement in San Antonio. “I am proud to be called a friend of Labor,” he began. “I am proud to be a part in joining with you in a movement that is not only concerned with the welfare of the working man of Texas but the public welfare of Texas in general.” Peña next drew a line in the sand, defining a vast and diverse House of Labor and then separating it from its enemies in the Chamber of Commerce:

I also think of organized labor in terms of a plumber who lives across the street whose daughter goes to school with my daughter; the carpenter who lives on the corner who is active in my church and civic affairs and who attend all precinct conventions and is dedicated to integrity and liberalism in the Democratic party. I also think of the hod carrier who lives around the block and is struggling to get his oldest boy through law school. I also think of that demure young lady who works for the telephone company.

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who lives next door to me. These are the people who symbolize the labor movement here in Bexar County and in the State of Texas.

The plumber and the carpenter, his audience knew, were white union craftsmen—the traditional face of organized labor. Peña recognizes their efforts, at work and in electoral politics, but he also draws attention to labor’s new faces. “Hod carrier” also meant unskilled and nonwhite, and the allusion to law school suggests that Peña’s own Mexicano neighbors and friends worry about the same things that Anglo workers do. The “young lady” from the phone company is also welcome in this new, revived, diverse labor movement, though she still remains “demure” or deferential to the union men. In short, Peña defines the “we”—that is, who labor should include and what it should fight for. 123

On the other side of the fence Peña situates his favorite enemy, the Chamber of Commerce. He notes that the city’s boosters brag about its missions and tourist destinations, but they “cannot brag about the fact that San Antonio is a cheap labor town.” One in three workers earned less than $1,000 annually, he said, far below the national average of more than $4,000 per year. This discrepancy is no accident, he added. Rather, “there is a combination of powerful forces organized to keep it that way.”

He turned to history and the current strikes to hammer home his point:

And this is the way it has been since the pecan shellers strike in 1937 [sic] here in San Antonio when innocent workers and their families were beaten, jailed, and threatened because they dared protest earning $2.38 for working 50 hours. As I said, this attitude has persisted for a long time—yes, my friends for too long. And this is the attitude that our trade unions and Garment Workers here on strike have to combat. And it is a hard

fight. We need your help...As a matter of fact, these forces are dedicated to bust the union movement here in San Antonio, don’t you forget that!

Peña continued with a call to action. He noted that poll tax sales were lagging, and that Texas labor should be able to mobilize at least 400,000 voters to join with other liberal groups “for a better Texas tomorrow.” He asked delegates to visit the DOT booth in the lobby to “join our movement.” He concluded by laying out a formula for moving forward:

This is your movement...This is the coalition of Organized Labor, the so-called minority groups, the farmer, the little business man, this is the natural coalition that Maury Maverick said in 1950 will “some day elect a liberal governor of the State of Texas” and I really believe that. But we must work together with a mutual understanding of our many problems in this coalition which is a liberal movement in the State of Texas.”

Indeed, Maury Maverick’s old coalition of two decades earlier had been reborn, with many of the same old pieces and even some of the same old leaders. On the Eastside, G. J. Sutton and the SNAP activists were on the march, while Peña’s Westside continued to organize. Both civil rights struggles put forth expansive visions of the future and were moving toward gaining independent political power. In the last few years of the 1950s, they began finding new organizational homes and allies in a suddenly vibrant, growing, and increasingly diverse labor movement led by individuals with similarly broad outlooks and the resources to launch unprecedentedly large new organizing initiatives. In fact, Hank Brown gave the next welcome address to the convention, again

echoing many of Peña’s points, and showing the delegates from across the state what a multiracial liberal coalition could look like.125

“Giant Union Drive Planned for S.A.,” blared the front-page headline of the daily San Antonio Express the day after their speeches. “Local union leaders aim to use the big state AFL-CIO convention as the springboard for ‘rebirth’ of a massive new organized labor movement in San Antonio,” the story began, marking “the beginning of a new era” for labor.126 But the paper missed Peña’s larger point: that “labor” now meant a diverse movement committed to profound political and economic change. Within a year, the coalition would grow to become a major force in local and state politics—a formidable force that no journalist could overlook.

125 Ibid, 32.
126 “Giant Union Drive Planned for S.A.,” San Antonio Express, November 17, 1959, 1.
Chapter 4 – The Door Finally Opens

Introduction

“Freedom is liberation from everything undemocratic,” San Antonio’s Albert Peña told a meeting of the Harris County Democrats in Houston in the summer of 1959. He alluded to Roosevelt’s four freedoms—of religions, of speech, of the press, and from want. The fourth, he continued, “is a positive affirmation of equal rights in education, hospital, and medical care. [Of] Freedom for all working men to organize into labor unions for better working conditions and decent wages... [Freedom] to engage in political parties of your choice...Freedom from discrimination and segregation in all public and quasi-public facilities.”

To fight for freedom meant to embrace liberalism, he added, and the vehicle for achieving those lofty goals was an unwaveringly liberal Democratic Party. Peña put the battle for the soul of the party bluntly: “You are either liberal or conservative... There cannot be a moderate view on the rights of labor because we might lose some of our business contacts. There cannot be a middle of the road on civil rights for fear we may lose some of our friends in East Texas.” Moderates advocated gradualism or delay or “anything but the right view,” he added. Change will come to Texas, Peña said, “only after liberalism is clearly defined by liberals without equivocation, evasion, or fear of controversy.” Doing so will bring together “the natural liberal coalition: organized labor, the Negro, and the Latin American, the farmer, the small businessman and the
independent liberal...” This may be a difficult route to victory in 1960, he concluded, but it’s “the only way I want to win.”

At the dawn of the new decade, unbeknownst to most its residents, Texas stood on the precipice of sweeping change. Liberal political activists grappled with the “favorite son dilemma,” that is, the question of how to respond to the presidential ambitions of their longtime antagonist, Lyndon Johnson. Local electoral and civil rights coalitions were beginning to flourish, and labor was again on the march.

Yet there was nothing “natural” about the unprecedented coming together of African Americans, ethnic Mexicans, and white labor and liberals in the 1960s. As Peña himself knew, such collaborative efforts had to be organized. And in 1959, despite the wide-ranging activities of Peña and countless other activists, white supremacy continued to dominate the state, from the capitol to the county courthouse and throughout the Democratic Party. The assertion of a multiracial statewide coalition remained largely aspirational.

The door finally and dramatically swung open when black college students occupied dozens of segregated downtown lunch counters across the state and demanded service as equals. The sit-ins represented a tactical innovation that attracted a new set of youthful activists, but they nonetheless depended upon the support and experience of longtime labor, civil rights, and political activists. The courage and tenacity of the students inspired veterans of the struggle and spurred them to new action. Both groups combined to use the sit-ins as a starting point for a new, broader wave of direct action.

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1 Alexander Heiken, “‘The Only Way I Want to Win,’” *Texas Observer*, July 4, 1959, 5.
demonstrations that addressed many of the decades-old, expansive goals of civil rights unionists like Moses LeRoy and black community organizers like G. J. Sutton. In less than three years, the newly active African American civil rights movements succeeded in desegregating public accommodations throughout Texas and the South, and they made major inroads toward their goals of decent housing, improved infrastructure, and economic opportunities.

At the same time, many of these activists continued to direct some of their efforts into the electoral arena, reaching new heights of power within the Democratic Party and providing critical support to the 1960 victory of the Kennedy-Johnson ticket. Likewise, ethnic Mexican activists like Peña rallied around the liberal presidential candidate, organizing Viva Kennedy clubs that then transformed into a new electoral and civil rights force, the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASO).

The sit-in and direct action civil rights movement and the successful Kennedy campaign also produced dramatic transformations in the state’s labor movement and its future political dynamics. A twist of fate brought San Antonio plumber Hank Brown back to Austin to run the Texas State AFL-CIO, which he promptly re-dedicated to the civil rights struggle and multiracial coalition building. While Johnson dominated the 1960 state Democratic convention and broke the back of a liberal challenge, and his vacant Senate seat then engendered a strident primary election that fractured Peña’s “natural coalition,” the divided elements of the party’s left wing again came together, first to support Henry Gonzalez’s run for Congress in 1961 and then to field a true liberal and outspoken integrationist candidate for governor in 1962. The latter’s campaign tore
apart black, brown, and white political communities even as it brought together activists across racial lines.

In sum, the ongoing experiments in multiracial collaboration in the early 1960s can be likened to a tide, ebbing and flowing twice daily before settling into a comfortable annual rhythm. And just as the tides gradually erode the shore and produce new coastlines and tidal basins, the back and forth of cooperation and conflict slowly gave rise to a new political logic by the end of 1962. The diverse activists’ successful navigation of the state’s treacherous political waters in this period, in turn, set the stage for the realization of Peña’s dream: an unequivocally liberal statewide coalition.

**The New Black Civil Rights Movement**

On February 1, 1960, four students at North Carolina A&T College staged sit-ins at a Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, triggering a wave of copycat demonstrations by black college students across the South. The scarcely organized and nationally uncoordinated protests reached Houston on March 4, marking the first such action west of the Mississippi River. Eldrewey Stearns, a twenty-six year old law student at the newly-renamed Texas Southern University (TSU) in Houston’s Third Ward, led the group of students who staged the city’s sit-in demonstrations, first at a Weingarten’s grocery near campus and then at numerous lunch counters throughout the neighborhood and finally downtown.

The students’ tactics were new, but the civil rights movement was not. Rather, the sit-ins reenergized an older cadre of activists, including civil rights unionists like
Moses and Erma LeRoy and the black union leaders along the waterfront. These longtime veterans of the struggle provided critical support to the student-led demonstrations while helping to connect the fight for the integration of public accommodations to the expansive freedom agenda of past. In fact, the decades-long fights against employment discrimination and for independent political power became key demands of the student movement, although they remained under the radar in many contemporary accounts and have long since been forgotten by historians. A closer look at the student uprising suggests that inter-generational and cross-class alliances played pivotal roles in the desegregation of the city while linking this one phase of the movement to the longer, broader, multiracial quest for democracy.

A native of Galveston, Stearns had “been disrespectful of racial bars most of his life,” according to Saul Friedman of the Houston Chronicle. “When he was in the service in Oklahoma he applied, without publicity, to become a student at a white college in Lawton, where he was accepted.” He refused to go to the back of the bus, carrying a copy of the Constitution in his back pocket as he “went where [he] wanted to...” Stearns told Friedman, “I was what some white folks in the South call a ‘smart nigger’...And I paid for it plenty.” He left the region and went to Michigan State University in order to “get an American education and not just [a] Southern education.” He returned to Houston after graduation and worked as a janitor and waiter while beginning his graduate studies at TSU. In August 1959, Stearns “blew up” when a police officer called him “boy,” a reaction that landed in him in jail, where two officers beat him. Stearns’ took
his case to the HCCO, which in turn used his complaint to renew its demand that the city investigate systemic police brutality against African Americans.²

When a group of TSU students got the idea to launch their own sit-ins, Stearns quickly emerged as the group’s leader. They initially called themselves the “Student Protest Movement,” while many contemporaries simply called the group the “sit-in demonstrators.” The sit-ins followed the national pattern: the operators of the stores shut down the lunch counters, allowed the black students to sit without providing them service, and finally ushered them out at the end of the day. The protests gradually swelled, as did white resistance. Three days after the first protest, on April 7, two masked white men kidnapped and brutally beat a young black man who was unaffiliated with the movement, carving the letters “KKK” into his abdomen before leaving him hanging by his feet from a tree. The Houston police increased their presence at the demonstrations and managed to prevent future violence while also refraining from arresting the protestors. The mayor appointed a biracial committee and charged it with coming up with a plan for facilitating voluntary integration by the targeted merchants. The students agreed to halt their demonstrations while the negotiations took place, but the

² Saul Friedman, “Negro Youths’ Ex-Leader Says Movement is ‘Dying,’”  Houston Chronicle,  October 2, 1961, in Houston Chronicle Morgue, Houston Metropolitan Research Center (hereinafter HCM-HMRC), filed under Progressive Youth Association (hereinafter PYA); “Negro Student Claims Two Cops Beat Him,” Houston Chronicle, August 26, 1959, HCM-HMRC, HCCO; also see Chapter 2. The definitive, semi-autobiographical work on Stearns is Thomas R. Cole, No Color Is My Kind: The Life of Eldrewey Stearns and the Integration of Houston, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997). Holly Hogrobooks, another leader of the student demonstrators, said that she was amazed by the accuracy of “Drew’s” memories and the veracity of Cole’s narrative. Holly Hogrobooks, phone interview by author, Houston, May 26, 2010.
committee soon fractured internally, dragged its feet for weeks and then months, and finally dissolved. The retailers continued to refuse service to blacks.3

Stearns attended the early April, 1960, founding meeting of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and he returned to Houston energized and eager to re-ignite the movement. On April 25, 1960, he led a small group of largely demoralized students in renewing the protests. They requested service at the Greyhound bus station café, and to their great surprise, they were served without incident. The victory reinvigorated the movement, which was reorganized that night into a formal group called the Progressive Youth Association (PYA). In early May, Stearns and the PYA extended their targets downtown and launched a boycott and mass picketing of the intransigent retailers. The public relations director of the Foley’s department store chain responded to the pickets by organizing a complete media boycott of the demonstrations, which nonetheless continued without local publicity. TSU administrators, black businessmen, and even the black weekly papers all collaborated with the white elites and attempted to discourage the student protestors. Meanwhile, the white businessmen agreed behind closed doors to participate in a coordinated, gradual desegregation plan, which they quietly implemented by September. The PYA had achieved the integration of the city’s lunch counters and large retail establishments. Still, according to historian Thomas Cole, the media blackout and “unilateral desegregation” combined to “suck the wind out of the PYA’s sails.”4

While the businessmen, mayor, and police chief congratulated themselves for their enlightened leadership and their successful avoidance of the violence and general unrest that took place in other Southern cities, black civil rights activists remained far from content. Both the PYA members and longtime activists in the HCCO and local NAACP knew that Jim Crow continued to dominate the lives of African Americans in Houston. Employment discrimination remained nearly ubiquitous, and public buildings were still sharply segregated, as were countless cafes and other public accommodations. Whites retained disproportionate political power and virtually every elected office, and many of the city’s black and brown residents lived in slums and struggled to get by.

Stearns and the PYA came up with a new strategy in the wake of the December, 1960, U. S. Supreme Court ruling that prohibited segregation in waiting rooms and restaurants involved in interstate travel. Long before the first freedom riders set out to “test” the court-mandated integration of interstate bus service in the South, PYA members in Houston began sitting in at the city’s Union Station train terminal. After ignoring the protestors and closing down intermittently for several months, the station café operator in late February, 1961, grew exasperated and called the police. Officers arrived and arrested fourteen PYA demonstrators, a move that energized both the students and the city’s older, longtime civil rights activists. In the next four months, PYA protestors added new targets to their list, staging sit-ins at a Loew’s and other theaters,
the City Hall and County Courthouse cafeterias, and other locales. Police responded with eight mass arrests that netted nearly two hundred charges.\textsuperscript{5}

The escalating demonstrations and police repression connected the students much more intimately with veteran activists in the HCCO and NAACP. The elders’ support was not entirely new. In March, 1960, immediately after the first Houston demonstration, the HCCO met and endorsed the student sit-ins, pledging “its full ‘support and efforts’ to the protests. In May, 1960, the Council’s president, A. M. Wickliff, led the integrationist faction of the mayor’s biracial committee, which he angrily denounced after conservatives stalled his efforts to win “immediate action on open lunch counters.” The Council also co-sponsored and endorsed a “yes” vote on a local referendum on school desegregation.\textsuperscript{6}

Yet the events of 1961 brought the PYA an outpouring of support from older activists who were veterans of the civil rights and labor movements as far back as the 1920s. As the protests intensified, Moses LeRoy emerged as the key diplomat who built support for student activists among the community’s diverse elder leadership. Both Moses and Erma LeRoy served on the PYA’s Advisory Board, with Moses’s name appearing near the top of the youth group’s letterhead. Both also remained activists in the local NAACP, which was slowly rebuilding from its near destruction by the State of


Texas Attorney General’s office. (Erma became president of the re-organized branch by 1965.) Moses continued to serve as the parliamentarian of the HCCO, a position that made him an officer and gave him a voice in the Council’s exclusive executive committee. It also allowed him to shape the organization’s interior debates by interpreting its use of parliamentary procedure. In 1961, with LeRoy as an officer and key activist, the HCCO demanded yet another investigation of police practices, this time to probe the arrest of the Loew’s theater demonstrators. The old railroad unionist—now almost 63—personally took to the streets alongside the students—many photographs of the youth-led demonstrations feature a lone, older figure marching and singing in their ranks, a gray man frequently unidentified but who is almost always Moses LeRoy.7

LeRoy also helped lead the effort to raise money from black businesses, unions, and elites to pay for the students’ bail and other legal expenses. He did so primarily among other members of the HCCO, aided by his friend and ally Quentin Mease, who as the head of the city’s all-black South Central YMCA was accustomed to shaking down black businessmen and clergy for donations. Immediately after the arrests at Union

7 PYA letterhead for Letter from Eldrewey Stearns to Dan Cobb, Editor, Houston Chronicle, May 8, 1961 and Letter from Freddie Jo Ray to Bill Porterfield, June 29, 1961—both in HCM-HMRC, PYA. “N.A.A.C.P. Planning New Shift to Labor Rights,” Houston Chronicle, September, 23, 1962, HCM-HMRC, NAACP; Bill Connolly, “‘Bama Protest Rally Called Here Sunday,” Houston Chronicle, March, 1965 (rally took place on March 14), HCM-HMRC, NAACP; “Attorney Heads Council of 64 Civic Groups,” Houston Chronicle, January 22, 1961, HCM-HMRC, HCCO; “62 Negro Groups Demand Probe of Houston Theater Pickets Arrest,” Houston Chronicle, April 6, 1961, HCM-HMRC, HCCO. For an example of the protest photographs, see the third from final plate in Cole, No Color Is My Kind. Cole adds that LeRoy offered to launch a joint campaign co-sponsored by the NAACP and PYA in May 1960, but the students declined, not wanting “to take a back seat to their elders” (53). Also see “Houston Negro Youth Leader Accuses N.A.A.C.P. of Intrusion,” Houston Chronicle, May 15, 1960, HCM-HMRC, NAACP, which mentions the Association’s national youth director, but not LeRoy. Stearns’ hostility may be partially attributable to the anti-authoritarian ethos of the founding SNCC convention. Nonetheless, the preponderance of evidence suggests that, at the local level, older civil rights activists like LeRoy used the HCCO, NAACP, and black labor unions to offer critical support to the students, who gratefully appreciated it (see below).
Station, Mease quickly activated his networks, winning a resolution of support from the city’s association of black doctors and bringing in a number of large contributions from various African American professionals.\(^8\) In 1962, Mease and in all likelihood LeRoy played significant roles in helping the HCCO raise $8,000 to free student protestors who were jailed after failing to pay their fines for the Union Station sit-ins the previous year.\(^9\)

LeRoy was just one of several black unionists who added fuel to the student-led fire. Howard Middleton, Jr., an officer of Hod Carriers’ and Common Laborers Local #18, worked in construction in the daytime and attended classes at TSU in the evenings. Like LeRoy, Middleton was a member of the PYA’s Advisory Board, and he may have served as an officer of the PYA as a student member. In any event, Middleton helped coordinate the direct action campaign and personally participated in lunch counter sit-ins and marches downtown. He later recalled that a white man with a “country” appearance entered a restaurant where he sat-in, threatening the demonstrators with a loaded gun before leaving the scene without incident. Middleton walked side-by-side with other students, but as a slightly older working man, he also brought his young daughter with him to the demonstrations. He was surprised to discover that his daughter’s presence helped him avoid being arrested, so he remained on the streets while the other students went to jail. Left outside, Middleton and his brother Jimmy, the president of Local 18

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and also a PYA Advisory Board member, appealed to the union’s nearly five thousand members to raise money for the civil rights cause, passing the hat at union meetings and on the job and funneling the cash to the students and their lawyers.  

The most dramatic showing of black labor’s support for the PYA came in June, 1961, when police broke up a fundraising party at the Longshoremen’s Local 872 union hall and sparked the movement’s largest mass mobilization to date. According to a newspaper report, Stearns planned the event on Friday, June 2, in order to “thank union men for their support of the Negro youth group.” Historian Thomas Cole adds that Stearns prepared a plaque to present to local president Raymond Duncan and hoped that doing so would spark a new round of contributions from rank and file longshoremen who had just received their paychecks. The PYA rented a pick-up truck and began playing music in front of the ILA hall at 75th and Memphis streets, right by the Ship Channel. Houston Police arrived suddenly and shut down the party, claiming that organizers had not been granted a permit for the public address system. They arrested four PYA members and four union men. “An estimated 800 persons milled around the officers as they carted off the eight arrested,” the Chronicle reported. While a handful of the longshoremen ran to their cars to retrieve their shotguns, president Duncan and the union’s chaplain intervened and called for calm. The “badly outnumbered” police left—“They hauled ass—fast,” according to PYA leader Jim Daniels—after which Duncan moved the meeting inside and turned the jukebox back on. Following what Daniels later called “a live demonstration” of police harassment and black resistance, the union

members got out their wallets, and “it rained money.” The meeting concluded with the award ceremony as planned.\footnote{Daniels’ quotation and “rained money” in Cole, \textit{No Color Is My Kind}, 70-71. See also Middleton interview by author; Hogrobbooks phone interview by author; author’s fieldwork with ILA Local 872 (see note 12); and “Personal Telephone Directory and Local History of I. L. A. 872,” ca. 1960.}

A few days later, on June 7, “More than 500 Negro longshoremen and their wives marched in an angry mass on City Council Wednesday and charged that Houston police were using a ‘double standard’ of law enforcement and inciting riot by breaking up legal meetings.” Other estimates of the entire crowd put it closer to 1,000, including a number of PYA member who were “sprinkled” throughout. “The group crowded the corridors of City Hall and overflowed the City Council chamber,” the \textit{Chronicle} added. Raymond Duncan addressed the Council and said that union-PYA meeting had been peaceful until the police “busted in and tried to incite trouble.” The arrests were not immediate, he told the generally hostile Council, as the officers stood around brandishing tear gas guns and “using abusive language toward the people there.” Mayor Lewis Cutrer tried to cut off Duncan’s testimony, but Councilman Louie Welch continued to question the black union president. The latter added that “police arrested and ‘embarrassed’ a preacher who was praying in an effort to avoid a riot that the police were inciting,” noting that union’s chaplain had been briefly detained. Duncan pulled no punches as he connected the breaking up of the fundraising party to a pattern in which police routinely abused black workers, especially to shake them down on payday. It “was only one of many incidents of arresting Negro longshoremen without cause and using abusive language.”\footnote{Ibid; “500 Negroes March on City Hall; Protest Arrest of Eight at Rally,” \textit{Houston Chronicle}, June 7, 1961, HCM-HMRC, PYA (all quotations).}
The charges against the four PYA members and four ILA members were quickly dropped. Duncan’s stinging testimony surely played a role in their dismissal, as did Councilman Welch’s support. But the show of force of some 500 to 1,000 angry black union men and a handful of PYA demonstrators surely tipped the balance in the movement’s favor. In fact, the march of this “angry mass” on City Hall represented the largest documented single demonstration in the PYA’s history. Such a numerous crowd was commonplace for a union capable of turning out 800 members for a Friday night party, but it dwarfed the typical student-led protests. It vividly demonstrated the power that organized black workers could (and did) wield in the larger civil rights movement.

Stearns and the PYA received substantial assistance from longtime civil rights unionists and black rank and file members, but they also contributed to the broader working-class struggle for economic justice. In January, 1961, for example, they conducted sit-ins at City Hall that successfully opened the cafeteria to the city’s few black police officers. More generally, their demands almost always included requests that retails hire or promote black workers, and the PYA’s own sense of accomplishment often centered on jobs. A June, 1961, letter from a PYA member to the Houston Chronicle included a list of the group’s “achievements.” Just below the phrase “Lunch Counters” (presumably to note their integration) is a list of the number of black employees hired by nine different retailers. Ralston Drug led the way by adding sixteen black cashiers, and Weingarten’s hired fourteen more, while Weiners listed four new

“salesladies” and U-Tote-Em hired four black “managers.” PYA also boasted the integration of Jeppesen Stadium, two parks, and the local bus stations—all listed simply as “Open.” Yet these occupied a subordinate position when compared to the detailed accounting of which retailers hired how many black workers and in what capacities.14

Also in mid-June—a week after the near-riot and march of ILA members on City Hall—the PYA began picketing a small local grocery store in the predominately-black Fifth Ward. The store employed nearly twenty black workers, and served a mostly black clientele, but all five managers were white. The owner, Louis Orlando, claimed that the youth protestors students had demanded that he fire the five white managers and replace all of them with African Americans. When he refused, they called a boycott and began picketing the store to keep customers out. Orlando countered by suing the PYA for $110,000 in lost revenue. Stearns “denied in court” that the group was involved in the picketing, but the presiding judge scoffed at his claim of innocence, calling it an “insult to [his] intelligence.” Meanwhile, the grocer told a sympathetic Houston Chronicle reporter that the boycott had cost him 75% of his business and had forced him to lay off eight of the store’s nineteen black workers, and he questioned whether the PYA truly had their best interests at heart. Stearns told the paper that “his group was authorized by employees of the store to bargain for them although his is not a registered labor group.” He also changed his tune and took credit for the picketing. “I was seeking to uphold a

14 Letter from Ray to Porterfield, June 29, 1961, 2.
principle,” he said, adding that the PYA’s goal was “to bring to a group of people, and all people, freedom, dignity, and justice.”

In October, 1961, Stearns boasted that eighty-six lunch counters and public places had been desegregated since the launch of the student protests movement. He added that “Negroes have gotten better, higher paying jobs in many places. ‘More than $1 million has been added to the paychecks of Negroes who have gotten better jobs,’ Stearns said.”

Thus the PYA, like the black unionists who supported them, included the struggle for jobs as part and parcel of the effort to integrate public accommodations. Yet employment discrimination and other economic justice issues were not fringe concerns but mainstream goals of city’s broader civil rights movement.

Throughout the early 1960s, the HCCO and NAACP also continued to agitate around similar demands. The two groups had overlapping leadership, both of which included Moses LeRoy. In February, 1961, as the PYA launched its sit-ins at Union Station and local bus companies, the HCCO was engaged in its own battle for public ownership of the city bus system, in large part to keep fares low while improving service for black workers. Longtime activist and barber George T. Nelson collected over 4,000 signatures that eventually forced the city to renegotiate its contract with a private operator. About a year later, in January, 1962, a spokesman for the HCCO, “The city’s most powerful Negro organization...threatened opposition to a $40.5 million bond issue

15 “Judge Halts Young Negro Store Pickets,” Houston Chronicle, June 13, 1961 (all quotations); “Picketed Grocer Files Suit,” Houston Chronicle, June 10, 1961—both in HCM-HMRC, PYA.
16 Friedman, “Negro Youths’ Ex-Leader Says Movement is ‘Dying,’” Houston Chronicle, October 2, 1961, HCM-HMRC, PYA.
unless the city requires contractors to open hiring to all races.” The HCCO representative, attorney M. W. Plummer, added that, based on “general knowledge,” black workers faced widespread discrimination “on all work involving artisans or craftsmen.” The federal government required fair employment practices in its suppliers, Plummer said, and he urged the city to adopt a similar ordinance “requiring contracts on city jobs to have nondiscriminatory clauses.” Mayor Lewis Cutrer quickly came out in opposition to a fair employment ordinance, charging that it infringed upon the free market, employers, and craft unions. At the next City Council meeting, just three days prior to the bond referendum, another attorney and HCCO member named Francis Williams pressed Cutrer on the issue, and the Mayor claimed that the issue had been referred to the public works and legal departments for consideration. Williams replied that the HCCO would not endorse the bond issue on time for the election. In a reprise regarding a similar bond issue eleven months later (December, 1962), the HCCO announced that it would join the local AFL-CIO and sixteen other organizations in supporting a $9.6 million measure to build a new domed stadium that would become the landmark Houston Astrodome. HCCO president E. M. Knight explained that stadium construction “will provide employment for all people...” Apparently the Council’s persistent flexing of its muscles had produced some promises of change on the job front, even though a city ordinance remained elusive.

19 “18 Groups Backing Stadium Bond Issue,” Houston Chronicle, December 17, 1962, HCM-HMRC, HCCO. Cole adds that the same year, Quentin Mease led a group of elites that successfully negotiated the desegregation of the local baseball stadium and hotels in order to attract a Major League team to the city.
At the same time, the NAACP re-committed itself to the struggle for equal employment opportunities. Moses LeRoy was again at the forefront. In September, 1962, the Association’s general counsel Robert Carter and labor secretary Herbert Hill visited Houston to launch a national initiative against “racial discrimination in industrial employment” with the Bayou City as its “starting place.” They hoped to develop a “body of law” to use in court, much as they collected on-the-ground data as they had during the build up to Brown v. Board. Hill told the newspaper that both unions and industry would be targets, since both were “preventing Negroes from developing the skills that are required by automation and other industrial advancements,” producing a “labor crisis” for African Americans. “So, we are giving priority to such problems as the elimination of racial lines in the determination of job seniority,” Hill added. At the local level, the report added, “Negro labor leaders agree that job discrimination in local industry and in unions is a serious problem. Moses Leroy [sic], ...active in the affairs of the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks and delegate to the recent state A.F.L.-C.I.O. convention in San Antonio, commented, ‘Our experience certainly bears out the analysis of conditions in labor made by the N.A.A.C.P.’” A month later, the Chronicle reported that the Association was making good on its word, representing “an all-Negro union local” in a hearing on a racial discrimination charge. A trial examiner for the National Labor Relations Board was set to hear the complaint of Ivory M. Davis, a worker at the Hughes Tool Company and member of a segregated company union. Davis charged that the all-

white company union refused to process his grievance because he was black and not a member of the white local.  

Throughout the early 1960s, then, black students, unionists, and professionals collaborated in the struggle to desegregate public accommodations and improve access to better employment opportunities. These two seemingly divergent goals actually went in hand in glove, with much overlap in personnel, tactics, and philosophy. Moses LeRoy remained a common thread weaving these diverse groups of African American activists. From his perspective, the civil rights struggle in Houston was far from brand new. Rather, the student-led protest movement and the community organizing surrounding it represented the culmination of decades of street-level community in the Fifth and Third wards, networking and organizing with other black unionists, and careful negotiation with black elites. If the Cold War had all but destroyed the NAACP, and the HCCO had largely replaced it as the new coordinating body of Houston’s black political life, the PYA provided the shot in the arm that reenergized and renewed the long civil rights struggle. “Civil rights unionists” like the LeRoys and the workers along the waterfront injected all three organizations with a broad vision of economic justice and helped connect this expansive agenda to a new generation of activists.

Historian Thomas Cole concludes:

Peaceful desegregation occurred in Houston – as in many cities in Texas and throughout the South – because moderate white Southerners felt

compelled to break with diehard segregationists to preserve social peace, a positive media image for their city, and a prosperous economy. Once it became clear to Houston’s powerful blacks that white business interests would not unite to defend the color line in public accommodations, Eldrewey Stearns’s role as militant integrationist lost its historic edge.

Yet the intimate ties between Stearns’ PYA and the HCCO and all-black unions as well as the breadth of their combined demands—all of this suggests that the movement of the early 1960s was more than mere cannon fodder for behind-the-scenes, closed-door negotiations.

Rather, the sit-ins helped to bring the diverse elements of Houston’s African American community together, albeit briefly, in a broad-based struggle for both freedom and jobs. For a moment, from the first demonstration until late 1961, the protests in the streets activated inter-generational and cross-class networks that tied the “civil rights unionism” of the 1930s and the political activism of the 1950s to the newest struggles for spatial integration. The energy of the sit-ins would also underpin the movement’s next phases, as both veteran and newly-inspired activists continued to work for equal economic opportunity and independent political power. The sit-ins may have provided leverage for black elites who brokered deals with their white counterparts, pacts that resulted, against all odds, in the desegregation of public accommodations. But such negotiations did not produce substantial material improvements nor did they lead directly to autonomy in the electoral sphere.

Stearns himself chafed at the movement’s narrowing and the desire of elites to direct the struggle out of the streets and into the boardroom. The PYA always wanted to win “more than a hamburger,” to use Ella Baker’s phrase for the movement’s broader
objectives. By the fall of 1961, Houston’s black elites seized control of the movement by wielding the power of the pocketbook. Major donors decided that their financial contributions to the struggle should result in control, and a group of students who also shied away from further protests collaborated with them and took over the PYA. According to Cole, Stearns had “lost considerable credibility” in the city’s black community. All future direct actions (and financial transactions) would be approved by the Houston Sit-in Foundation. Stearns soon suffered the first of many mental breakdowns and temporarily disappeared from the scene, returning just long enough to complete the fight for integrated public accommodations in the spring of 1963. Once again, it was his threats of demonstrations that allowed elites to broker the final changes. Desegregation had been accomplished, but justice and power both remained a long way away. Some of the students, aided by veterans like the LeRoys and Middletons, would find new paths to carry the struggle forward.

The sit-in movement in San Antonio, as in Houston, was also a continuation of previous activism rather than a sharp departure from it. In fact, the first sit-in protests were staged by longtime adult activists in the local NAACP, and area college students and youth joined the protests once they were underway. The sit-ins extended the longer freedom struggle by introducing new tactics and increasing its visibility, but the goals,

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21 Cole, *No Color Is My Kind*, chap. 4 (first quotation on 89; second quotation on 98). Friedman, “Negro Youths’ Ex-Leader Says Movement is ‘Dying,’” *Houston Chronicle*, October 2, 1961; “Pro-Integration Group Loses Backing in Feud,” January 22, 1962—both in HCM-HMRC, PYA. Erma LeRoy served on the board of the Houston Sit-in Foundation. Given the couple’s history and their active support for the demonstrations, it is likely that she did so to serve as an advocate for the students, if not Stearns.
players, and pitfalls remained largely the same. Community organizers like Rev. Claude W. Black, undertaker G. J. Sutton, and publisher Eugene E. Coleman all participated in and mentored the new crop of younger activists, sharing their decades-old expansive vision for a movement that included economic justice and political power in addition to civil rights. And when the direct action phase of the struggle encountered roadblocks and began to sputter, the veterans helped the youth redirect their energies into new, more rewarding arenas—particularly electoral politics.

San Antonio’s movement was also unique in that it had a multiracial component. From its inception, the local group of young shock troops, Students for Civil Liberties (SCL), included ethnic Mexicans in its ranks as well as its leadership. While the group’s goals focused squarely upon ending formal segregation against African Americans, its diverse membership helped connect it to the growing ethnic Mexican civil rights struggle.

The idea to launch a direct action campaign against segregation in San Antonio restaurants actually predated both the formation of the SCL and the famous sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina. In December 1959, the local branch of the NAACP announced plans for a campaign, and on January 17, 1960, the association “launched a program against discrimination in downtown eating facilities.” Writing a guest column in SNAP News in late 1960, branch president Joseph Luter added that the program included “plans for an extensive membership drive and a drive against discrimination in Employment Practices.” As student sit-ins shook Houston, Austin, and other cities and across the South in early March, a youth leader of the local NAACP sent a letter demanding integration to San Antonio’s downtown retailers. When the business owners
failed to respond, Rev. Black and NAACP state youth director Harry Burns, also of San
Antonio, organized a mass meeting of “1,500 Negroes,” according to the Texas Observer.
The activists signed up at least five hundred attendees who pledged to stage sit-ins if the
merchants did not meet their demand. The retailers capitulated, and six chains opened
their lunch counters to black patrons on March 16, 1960. The NAACP’s Luter reported
that “San Antonio is aware of the approach and the results of the first phase of [the sit-in]
program, and our local membership increased more than fifty percent...”

As in Houston, city officials and black and white business leaders celebrated their
enlightened response to the threatened protests, yet once again the conflict was only
beginning. The city’s leading downtown department store, Joske’s, continued to treat
African Americans as second class customers, restricting them to shopping and eating in
the store’s basement and steadfastly refusing them service at its elite, second-floor
Camelia Room restaurant. On April 23, 1960, the NAACP launched sit-in
demonstrations inside the store. Joske’s temporarily closed the lunch counters, then
erected rope barriers manned by store security guards that kept black patrons away from
the store’s restaurants. The Association countered by putting up a picket on the street
outside. Protestors stood in the doorways, entreating would-be customers to boycott the
store and at times physically blocking their paths into the store. The city sent hundreds of
police officers to push the pickets away from Joske’s front entrance. Rev. Black, as an

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cover featuring Mr. and Mrs. Willie Lee Parker), San Antonio Black History Collection, 1873-1996
[hereinafter SABHC], University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections, Hemisfair Campus
/ Institute of Texan Cultures [hereinafter UTSA-ITC], MS 139, Box 2, Folder 4; “S.A. Stores Integrate;
White Held in Cutting,” Texas Observer, March 18, 1960; Robert A. Goldberg, “Racial Change on the
3 (August 1983): 355-357.
officer in the local NAACP branch and the head of the city’s black Baptist Ministers Union, helped lead the demonstrations. He later recalled:

One of the officers walked up to one of the preachers that was blocking the restaurant entrance and slapped him. The preacher just looked at him and walked off. The same officer started to threaten and curse me out. He said, “You better shut up or I’m going to take you down nigger!” The officer did not mean to the police station. He meant that he would beat me. So I just turned around and continue to march with the others.

Joske’s management closed the restaurant following the slapping and cursing incident. The pickets and boycott continued. The *Texas Observer* reported in early May that “groups of students from San Antonio College, St. Phillips Junior College, Trinity University, and Our Lady of the Lake” joined Rev. Black, the ministers, G. J. Sutton, and the other NAACP activists, adding that “they would continue appearing indefinitely at the store’s two eating places...Meanwhile, store employees acknowledged that business was suffering...An NAACP spokesman said 20,000 ‘I Have Quit Joske’s’ tags have been printed and more ordered.” The stand-off continued, and the boycott worked as intended. By the late summer, enough African Americans had “quit Joske’s” that the store finally caved and integrated all of its restaurants.\(^{23}\)

The NAACP had also demanded that Joske’s hire African Americans as cashiers and representatives on the department store’s main sales floor. In fact, the tail end of the

integration fight downtown coincided with the beginning of a broader fight for fair employment practices. The local branch of the Association launched this initiative in July, 1960, when its Labor & Industry Committee asked branch Youth Advisor Miss Beverly Johnson to organize a youth group to spearhead the effort. Johnson organized a new Youth Council that then elected William “Bill” Donahue, a student at the all-black St. Phillips College, as its president. The group conducted a survey of white-owned businesses in the Eastside in early August, and they found that most stores employed African American “checkers.” One chain of grocery stores, Handy Andy, conspicuously did not. The chain’s several Eastside locations had few or no black employees and no black workers in higher-level or managerial positions. After the youth sub-committee had “many conferences” with Handy Andy management that were “not successful,” the full NAACP board sent a letter to the chain demanding action. Branch president Luter succinctly summarized the developments in the pages of SNAP: “The management ignored the letter, and the results was [sic] the picketing of Handy Andy.”

Led by Johnson and Donahue, the Association’s youth wing initially took the lead in the picketing, a fact that irked some NAACP members. Yet, as Luter explained, it was the young members’ future at stake, and adults should support their goals. “Youth know they must meet the challenge,” Luter wrote in SNAP. They are adapting to the fast pace of technological and social change in late Twentieth Century, he continued. “They know that they will have to compete, and they want an equal chance at every phase. We must help them and give them an opportunity to destroy those impediments that will hinder them. To hold them down would retard them and make them unfit to meet the challenges
of such a fast, progressive, existence as we are experiencing.” The end of summer and the return of the school year required that adults now step up and take the youth’s position picketing the several Handy Andy stores. “We will need people to carry pickets,” Luter wrote, urging readers to contact Miss Johnson “and schedule the time you can give in this effort. We can use the services of every able-bodied person in San Antonio in this program. Remember this is your fight! Our youth by their own will and initiative want jobs when they finish school...”

Many older activists responded to Luter’s call and showed up for picket duty. G.J. Sutton served as one spokesman for the protestors. Rev. Black recalled that the branch used the same tactics that they had tested at Joske’s—standing in doorways, turning back customers with a boycott, and refusing to back down amid threats of violence. Charles Hudspeth, a longtime local NAACP leader who was close to Black, had a gun pulled on him by a white man. “The man began pointing his gun and yelling obscenities at Hudspeth,” Black remembered. “Without flinching, Hudspeth calmly turned around and kept on picketing. That was a scary moment for us all. We just knew that he would be shot.” Black adds that he and other NAACP activists forever teased Hudspeth about the incident, joking that he “came this close to being a hero!”

With renewed vigor from adult members of the association, the picketing and boycott continued. Luter contended that the group had “prepared to hold out as long as

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25 Black and Matthews, Grandpa Was a Preacher, 107. Also see Black, interview by author, 45:30-48:00; “Handy Andy Picketed,” Texas Observer, September 9, 1960, 2.
Handy Andy does not wish to negotiate. We have asked them and they have ignored us. We have no need to ask further. We will meet them for negotiating when they reply to our request for same.”

The standoff continued. In mid-December, the Labor & Employment Committee commended “the citizens of San Antonio for your cooperation of selective buying” and noted that picketing would continue at one location “during most evenings after 5:00 P.M.” The committee again asked supporters “to withhold patronage from all Handy-Andy stores, pending a favorable reply to our request for the hiring of cashier-checkers, and other levels of better positions...”

At some point the following spring or summer, the NAACP and Handy-Andy reached a compromise settlement. In July, 1961, Bill Donahue reported that the chain had not yet integrated “in true proportion,” but the protests did result in blacks “being employed in equal status in stores all over the eastern section of the city and part of the west side.” A month later, he added that the “placard carrying protest” had been discontinued after the protestors achieved their “desired end,” but he also reminded SNAP readers that the selective buying campaign would soon resume. The struggle continued, but NAACP leaders could at least take credit for the hiring of some African American checkers at Handy Andy. Perhaps more importantly, San Antonio had “witnessed the realization of the first formal protest against discriminative hiring policies...”

Donahue’s NAACP Youth Council began to overlap with another organization, the Students for Civil Liberties (SCL). On Lincoln Day, February 12, 1961—while the boycott of Handy Andy was still underway—students from the six local colleges staged a stand-in at the Majestic Theater, San Antonio’s finest such establishment. Led by Lionel J. Castillo and Perfecto Villareal, two ethnic Mexican students at St. Mary’s University on the Westside, SCL members approached the box office window in integrated pairs. One black youth joined either a white or a “brown” as each of twenty-five duos attempted to purchase tickets. As each set of partners was rebuffed, they returned to the end of the line and continued cycling through, thereby preventing the theater from making sales to other customers for three hours. SCL members repeated the action five times over the next five months.29

The stand-ins did not immediately result in the desegregation of the Majestic Theater, but they did bring black and brown youth together in unprecedented fashion. Sutton, Coleman, García, and Peña had all experimented in inter-racial alliances with one another as well as with white liberals, but the SCL represented the first joint organization and the first protracted contact among student activists of different racial groups. It was, in the words of Donahue and SCL’s second chairman, Perfecto Villareal, “a multi-ethnic group whose members are dedicated to the fight for full and just acceptance of Negroes in San Antonio and elsewhere.”30


30 William Donahue and Perfecto Villareal, “This is Progress,” SNAP News, July 27, 1962, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3.
In August, 1961, SCL sought to escalate the protests at the Majestic Theater. Castillo had graduated “cum laudia [sic]” in June and then left San Antonio to join the newly-formed Peace Corps for a tour in the Philippines. Donahue quit his post as the president of the NAACP Youth Council, frustrated by “conservative forces that seek to maintain status quo...” He felt “that he can best serve his race in another organization” and that the SCL had been more successful since its founding in February than had the NAACP. Villareal beame the new chair of the militant, multiracial youth protest group, which resumed demonstrations at sites across town that summer. They staged protests “Sunday after Sunday” at the Majestic and declared August 23-31 as “Theatre Integration Week” in San Antonio. “The group ‘hit’ theatres that they had not filed a complaint with in the past,” Donahue reported, and it conducted a survey of one thousand customers. SCL found that 89% of regular theater patrons said that they would continue attending if integrated, while only 2% said no. The study “disproved the old ‘common consent’ theory,” according to Donahue, leaving only bigotry to explain the theater’s intransigence.31

The protests finally paid dividends beginning in December. The SCL had continued their protests and engaged in “intense negotiations” behind the scenes. Youth activists traveled to Dallas and Austin “to confer with company officials” and held “conferences with businessmen on the local level [and] discussions with top level executives of the Interstate Theatre chain” that owned the Majestic and “journeyed to San Antonio seeking a way to settle the persevering demands for complete integration.” The

31 Bill Donahue, “In Our City” column, SNAP News, June 2, July 14, August 11, and August 18, 1961; Donahue and Villareal, “This is Progress,” SNAP News, July 27, 1962—all in SABHC, MS 139, Box 3.
group also conducted outreach with consumers as “other SCL members went to the people and told the story.” Finally, “After fifteen packed months of active negotiation and public relations,” the theater desegregated its operations. Working with local leaders and the City and Catholic Interracial Councils, SCL chairman Villareal also secured a commitment from “other local businesses [to] consider such a policy” of non-discrimination. Donahue optimistically concluded, “racial equality in San Antonio...is a going reality that is achieving larger proportions everyday...Racial discrimination...will become a thing of the past.” The SCL called on San Antonio residents to “patronage establishments that have integrated and continue to protest continued deprivation of human rights...”

The Majestic Theater integrated its seating, but “racial equality” remained a long way off. As Donahue knew, the protests at Joske’s, Handy Andy, the Majestic, and other stores merely opened the door for progress. Employment opportunities remained extremely stilted, and the East Side’s infrastructure and housing were still inadequate. Veteran activists in the NAACP and around SNAP News mentored younger activists like Donahue even as they continued their longtime efforts in all of these areas.

As they had in the 1950s, Black, Sutton, Coleman, Burns, and countless others continued to organize for fair employment, neighborhood improvements, and independent political power. SNAP News continued to closely monitor national developments related to equal employment opportunity. Two Texans figured prominently in these stories. Newly-elected Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson chaired

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32 Donahue and Villareal, “This is Progress,” SNAP News, July 27, 1962—all in SABHC, MS 139, Box 3; Goldberg, “Racial Change on the Southern Periphery,” 363.
the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity (PCEEO), a body charged with rooting out discrimination among federal contractors, particularly in the field of defense. Jerry Holleman, the president of the Texas AFL-CIO in the late 1950s, spearheaded many of the Committee’s investigations in his new job as U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor (see below for more information of this appointment). The NAACP’s Herbert Hill brought complaints to the PCEEO, and SNAP approvingly cited examples of measured progress. One issue proudly reprinted a telegram from LBJ to Joe Scott, an African American teacher and political activist in San Antonio, requesting the latter’s presence at a PCEEO meeting in Washington, D.C. A caption added that Scott “is calling a conference of Civil Service, State, City, and private industry employees to discuss with them any complaints they may have...”

At the local level, SNAP continued to highlight small stories of race progress and pride in the employment field. In May, 1960, the paper noted “another first” in the tax office when a black woman was appointed as a “clerk typist.” Mrs. D. Sims, the breakthrough employee, appeared on the paper’s cover with both Valmo Bellinger and G.J. Sutton. Later that year, SNAP highlighted the grievance of a fired “key-punch operator” at Brooks Air Force Base. The worker, Miss Julia Dunlap, demanded and won a four day hearing on her dismissal (the decision was pending, and no record of its conclusion exists). Around the same time, the white manager of a shoe store across the

street from Joske’s fired the company’s sole black worker. George Williams had worked at the store as a “helper” for five years before being fired for insubordination. “Snap feels that there are enough Negroes trading at this store to have at least one Negro salesman,” the paper opined. “WHAT DO YOU THINK?” SNAP announced in July, 1961, that Lone Star Brewing Company had hired the Negro Chamber of Commerce (of which Coleman was a member) as an employment service in order to find between eight and twenty temporary employees for its summer spike in business. The article added that the brewery also employed twenty regular black workers, including sales representative W.B. Carrington, who was also a vice-president of the Negro Chamber. On August 18, 1961—just before the SCL launched “Theatre Integration Week”—Bill Donahue reported that the Whooper Burgers drive-in hired two “Negro girls as cashiers” in both of their East Houston Street locations on the Eastside. “No incidents have arisen,” he added. One of the two “girls” was Miss Shirley A. Childress, a youth activist in the NAACP who had led the association’s annual membership drive and stood as a contestant in its “Freedom Queen” pageant.34

As this last case suggests, the concern with employment affected nearly everyone and ran deep in the Eastside’s associational and political life. The local, state, and regional units of the NAACP remained strongly committed to the fight for equal employment, and not only in conjunction with the sit-ins. Meeting at Southwest

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Regional Conference in Dallas in June, 1961, Association leaders prioritized “accelerated action in: 1. Job opportunities for Negroes.” SNAP added: “After hearing delegates enumerate the industries in their respective states which exclude Negroes from employment, the group voted to accelerate their program for removal of racial barriers in municipal, county, state and federal jobs. [Also] included were utilities, [the] telephone company, department stores and industries with government contracts.” In 1962, the San Antonio NAACP adopted job opportunities as an area of “major emphasis.” Late that year the local unit hosted the meeting of the Texas state conference of branches, including one workshop led by Harry Burns and Hank Brown that addressed employment issues. The conference concluded with a mass meeting at Rev. Black’s church.35

Led by Burns, the local NAACP launched a campaign at Southwestern Bell called “Operation Telephone Company,” which would be “the beginning of a concentrated move toward integration of employment in local municipal utilities.” Burns told SNAP that he had previously sent letters asking businesses to pledge to “hire regardless of race, color, or creed, when there is an opening.” When the telephone company agreed to do so, the branch organized a group of “highly qualified” applicants to go to its employment office and seek work. The applicants, all black women, “ranged from teachers through stenographers,” and some were “over-qualified” like one “multi-linguist, and a former New York telephone operator.” The applicants were interviewed and reported being

“graciously treated.” Burns considered it a “favorable first step,” though no one was immediately hired.36

The link between the direct action protests and the fight for employment rights came full circle in the summer of 1962, when SNAP received news that reignited the fight against Joske’s. Teamsters Local 968 in Houston sent notice that Joske’s fired a black truck driver named Arthur Parker for organizing his fellow drivers to join the union. Teamsters staffer Ray Schaefer added that was “invariably” the “Negro or Latin American” who got fired under such conditions, and that “The Houston truck drivers are on strike to help Parker get his job back.” SNAP added a threat and call for support to the bulletin: “Joske’s should remember that it was only a short time ago that they ran into a picket battle with NAACP for refusing to serve Negroes at their lunch counters. We feel sure Joske’s does not want this repeated. Please give the union your full support in helping Parker regain his job.”37

On June 15, SNAP ran a front-page feature on the situation, adding more details and featuring a photo of one of the Houston strikers. Parker “personally signed up most of his fellow employees for the Union,” which won an NLRB-supervised election 18 to 7. Joske’s then laid him off, claiming that there was a lack of work. It also refused to negotiate with the union. The NLRB held a hearing and determined that Parker was in fact dismissed for union activities, and it ordered Joske’s to reinstate him. The company then attempted to buy him out, but he refused, fearing that other companies would also

37 “Parker Fired by Joske’s,” and “Please Do Not Trade at Joske’s,” SNAP News, June 9, 1962, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3.
black-list him for being a union activist. When Joske’s listed a vacancy in the trucking department but transferred someone else instead of re-hiring the laid off Parker, his “fellow employees voted unanimously to strike for the purpose of getting Parker’s job back.” The union began picketing Joske’s Houston warehouse, two Houston stores, the site of the protests in downtown San Antonio, and another suburban store at San Antonio’s Las Palmas shopping center. Teamsters business agent R. G. Miller added that customers were respecting the picket line and refusing to shop at Joske’s four department stores in the two cities.  

Two weeks later, SNAP reported that the union had won. “Please Trade at Joske’s,” blared a large headline on the conflict. Teamsters’ Local #968 “says thanks” to “the many individuals who helped the strike at Joske’s of Texas in San Antonio. Joske’s agreed to reinstate the employee, and to sit down and negotiate...for a contract.” The piece quoted a letter from the union’s Schafer, adding, “We feel that SNAP News was very instrumental to bringing about a successful conclusion to this strike...” Meanwhile, a front-page blurb in the same issue noted that Teamsters Local #657 in San Antonio had also won a grievance. Hollis Hilton, a black worker, had been fired but was “recently restored to his employment through negotiations of the Teamsters Union.” Hilton, a member of the union, received pay for his lost time. He commented, “It is wonderful to belong to a Labor organization where there is no racial discrimination.”

38 “Please Do Not Trade at Joske’s – Until They Rehire Union Employee,” SNAP News, June 15, 1962, 1, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3.
39 “Please Trade at Joske’s,” SNAP News, June 29, 1962, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3.
40 “Teamsters Win,” SNAP News, June 29, 1962, 1, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3.
The Teamsters’ strike against Joske’s brought SNAP activists and San Antonio’s black civil rights movement together with organized labor in unprecedented ways. Most unions did practice racial discrimination, and stories like Hollis Hilton’s remained exceptional. Collaboration between the longtime Eastside activists and the unions wasn’t entirely new, but clearly such ties were growing more intimate. About a month after the dual Teamsters victories, the activist paper ran another, self-reflexive report. “SNAP Goes Union,” the headline declared, accompanied by a large union label bug and a photograph of Coleman with his hand raised as he took the oath of membership of the Amalgamated Lithographers of America Local #83. “Now a Union Shop,” the article concluded, “SNAP and C. & S. Printers are prepared to bring to you the latest methods in the field of printing...”

Finally, longtime civil rights activists, joined by youthful demonstrators, continued their quest to improve the Eastside’s infrastructure and housing stock. The most significant example of this activity was the “Nebraska Street Death Trap,” a dangerous railroad underpass that had been the target of SNAP editorials as early as 1958 (see chapter 3). The narrow tunnel frequently flooded, and even in the best of times it was not wide enough for two lanes of traffic and pedestrians traveling in both directions. In the early summer of 1961, G.J. Sutton, Rev. Black, and SCL leader Bill Donahue all collaborated to organize “a protest movement” to demand that the city replace the tunnel. With television and other news media on hand, “Long lines of cars were detoured from passage through the ‘exterminator.’” The City Council had allocated $180,000 to remove

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41 “SNAP Goes Union,” *SNAP News*, August 24, 1962, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3.
and replace the underpass, but “not even a pebble” had been moved, even after the protests. “This is the only such construction in San Antonio,” Donahue reported in SNAP, adding, why should it be here, in our neighborhood? He continued: “A Mass March to City Hall to inform these well meaning city fathers that their eastside peers are fed up and want this exterminator removed is [seemingly] the only answer. I’m ready to go HOW ABOUT YOU?”

The campaign picked up new steam in January 1962, when a black airman, Staff Sergeant Lonnie Shelton, Jr., died in a traffic accident in the underpass. SNAP published a photograph of a bus approaching the “death trap” and pledged to run it on the front page with the caption “How Long?” until the City made the necessary repairs. Donahue asked readers who wished to join the effort to contact him or Robert Gomez, another SCL activist and SNAP contributor, who also made a pitch for support in his column. On February 7, Sutton, Black, Coleman, “and many other citizens and civic leaders” went to the City Council to make their case, but the chambers were “deserted at 9:30 a.m.” Meetings normally ran into the afternoons, leading Coleman to conclude that the Council had learned of their plans and had “ducked” them to avoid addressing the issue. SNAP retorted defiantly: “WE SHALL NOT STOP. We shall not be deferred, nor shall we be put off and pushed around. We shall MARCH ON CITY HALL, we shall sit-in at city hall, and we shall be heard, FOR WE SHALL SPEAK.”

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42 Bill Donahue, “In Our City,” SNAP News, August 18, 1961, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3.
43 “Nebraska Street Death Trap Kills Airman,” SNAP News, January 12, 1962, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3. Also see other 1962 issues of SNAP in the same box.
next week and found the City Council in session. A representative of the railroad was also in attendance, and the city fathers passed a resolution to construct a “new, wider underpass” by September. The protests and editorials had worked. SNAP continued to run photographs of the construction project until it was completed on schedule (and it added a new weekly picture until the sidewalks were also finished several months later).  

The black civil rights movement in San Antonio, like its counterpart in Houston, connected youth-led organizations with longtime activists in a broad struggle for not only integration but also employment opportunities and other forms of social and economic justice. Through the NAACP, the SCL, and SNAP News, San Antonio’s most militant African American organizers staged a series of sit-ins, stand-ins, marches, and other direct action demonstrations that all combined to transform their city. Lunch counters, restaurants, movie theaters, and grocers all opened their doors to black patrons, and more importantly, many of them hired African American workers for the first time. Coordinated—and at times multiracial—campaigns resulted in substantial progress in job opportunities at area defense contractors, municipal utilities like the phone company, and countless private employers. Civil rights activists began finding common ground with trade unions that also took up the fight for labor rights without practicing racial discrimination. The civil rights activists proved critical to the union’s boycott of Joske’s and helped a black worker win reinstatement and back pay. Coleman joined the lithographers’ union as a way to both reach union customers and continue deepening these ties. Finally, SNAP News and allied activists applied significant pressure to city

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46 “City Council Promises Elimination of ‘Death Trap,’” SNAP News, February 16, 1962, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3.
officials and made their voices heard at City Hall. As a result, the “death trap” no longer terrorized their neighborhood.

Despite this long list of accomplishments, both contemporary journalists and historians have downplayed the role of protest and community activism in the transformation of San Antonio’s racial politics. In May 1960, the liberal white Texas Observer reported that the city was “almost completely integrated” and that change had been accomplished “without strife or bitterness and with little fanfare.” The paper credited the “quality, the courage, and the foresight of its leadership—religious, political, business, and civic—which has faced, in interracial harmony and cooperation, the great challenge of integration...” While both races “quietly conferred,” department store and restaurant managers eschewed “Southern social customs with ease and grace.”47 In other words, desegregation was a quickly and easily awarded gift from enlightened leaders, not the product of a protracted, intentional fight by determined civil rights organizers.

Historian Robert A. Goldberg, whose 1984 article remains the only scholarly study of the San Antonio struggle, reaches a similar conclusion. Rev. Black, Burns, Sutton, and other NAACP activists created a crisis, he argues, that “traditional” leaders like Valmo Bellinger then used for leverage for private, back-room negotiations with the city’s white GGL leadership.48 Although such a dynamic was certainly at play, emphasizing the negotiations over the protestors who changed the terms of debate discredits and diminishes the significance of their efforts. Desegregation in San Antonio

47 “The San Antonio Example,” Texas Observer, May 6, 1960, 8. Notably, the editor parenthetically added: “(But see this week’s reports on Joske’s...)”
48 Goldberg, “Racial Change on the Southern Periphery.”
was not a product of bargaining between elites; rather, the negotiations themselves were results of direct action protests.

Likewise, there is much evidence of “strife and bitterness” toward civil rights demonstrators and little proof of “interracial harmony and cooperation” beyond the social relations of the protestors within the SCL. Police officers slapping religious leaders, guns being pulled on protests, city business and political leaders dragging their feet for months if not years—all of these are signs that San Antonio looked more like Birmingham than a mythical racial paradise. At the same time, the expansive vision of San Antonio’s civil rights leaders, the relatively slow pace of progress in the always-present field of employment, and the major significance to activists of seemingly innocuous issues like the Nebraska Street “Death Trap” all point to the need to reevaluate the true meaning of integration. Perhaps elites should receive some credit for the desegregation of public accommodations, as the Observer and Goldberg suggest. But the bulk of the evidence indicates that activists such as Black, Coleman, Donahue, and Sutton led the push for the full integration of those businesses, for the opening of economic opportunities for the city’s black residents, and for altering irreversibly the distribution of power in San Antonio.

The longtime Eastside activists had undoubtedly made themselves heard. The pressure they applied produced sweeping, unprecedented change. And they were just getting started.
¡Viva Kennedy! (In Black and Brown)

If the direct action phase of the black civil rights movement opened the door for democracy in Texas, activists plunged through it most notably in the electoral arena. Civil rights agitation and political activism were never entirely separate, and the fight for political recognition and power often went hand-in-hand with the quests for integration and equal opportunity. Activities in one field often reinforced work in the other.

The seismic shifts in the national and state political landscape beginning in 1960 created new possibilities for local civil rights and electoral activism, energizing new groups of community organizers and contributing to new alliances among longtime agitators. More importantly, the pressures, opportunities, and implications of the long presidential election cycle created newly-powerful electoral constituencies composed of liberal ethnic Mexicans and African Americans. These new blocs, in turn, raised the profile of veteran labor and civil rights activists and helped them become full partners in the state’s nascent “liberal movement.”

Lyndon B. Johnson loomed large over the developments of 1960. His presidential ambitions were well-known at the dawn of the new year, and members of every county Democratic club felt the weight of the senior senator’s characteristic “lean.” As noted above, Albert Peña had advised the Harris County Democrats to solve the so-called favorite son dilemma by remaining true to the principles of liberalism, namely the full enjoyment of democratic rights by all. Yet as the county and state conventions neared, there were no clear-cut liberal candidates for statewide office, and internal party politics had all but been subsumed to the politicking of Johnson forces. The Senator’s men did
not want their candidate to be bogged down in or embarrassed by the party’s internecine
wars; they desired only a clearly instructed delegation that would go “All the way with
LBJ” at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles.

Johnson had begun putting together his winning formula several years earlier. In
1957, he ushered the nation’s first Civil Rights Act since Reconstruction through the
Senate, overcoming multiple Southern filibusters and brokering a compromise that
ultimately left nobody happy. Die-hard Dixiecrats in Washington and home in Texas
began turning away from Johnson, who continued to position himself as a moderate on
civil rights. Although most of the state’s conservative elected officials followed the lead
of Governor Price Daniel and continued to support Johnson, the far right wing of
grassroots Party activists increasingly clamored for independence. They organized into a
John Birch Society-style shadow group called Freedom in Action, supported the
perennial Republican gubernatorial candidate Jack Cox, and battled for control of local
parties and nonpartisan municipal elections. The liberals continued to identify with
Ralph Yarborough, whom they re-elected to a six-year term in 1958.

In short, the Texas Democratic Party in early 1960 was composed of not two but
three competing factions, with most of the erstwhile conservatives and official party
apparatus in the Johnson-Daniel fold, surrounded by ideological dissidents on both sides.

Liberals statewide carried out their biennial routine of selling poll taxes in
December and January and focusing on get-out-the-vote efforts in advance of the May
primaries and county conventions. In late February, the Democrats of Texas held their
fourth annual convention, passing a wide range of liberal “issue” resolutions but
ultimately failing to take a stand on Johnson’s campaign. Dallas labor lawyer Otto Mullinax pushed a move intended to call out and embarrass LBJ but later withdrew it when it drew opposition from organized labor and national committeewoman Frankie Carter Randolph of Houston. The convention also rejected another measure, pushed by a Johnson supporter, commending the Senator for his stands in support of civil rights. The sympathetic *Texas Observer* called the DOT gathering a “puzzled posture,” adding that liberals were “fighting for footing in the tide of a Johnson year.”

The liberals’ confusion remained evident in May and June, 1960, as various local units adopted vastly different strategies regarding the presidential election and upcoming state convention. Houston liberals were trounced at the polls and at precinct conventions on May 7, losing three incumbent state representatives to conservative challengers in the first primary and two more in the run-off. “Forces friendly to Freedom in Action, perhaps Freedom in Action itself” came out en masse to support their former leader, Jack Cox, in his unopposed Republican gubernatorial primary. At the same time, the conservatives easily won their Democratic precinct conventions, which in turn allowed them to dominate the Harris County convention. After the arch-conservatives voted down a loyalty pledge that would require all national delegates and electors to support the Democratic nominees (as they had refused to do in 1952 and 1956), Mrs. Randolph and members of the Harris County Democrats staged a walkout. They held a rump conventions and promised a challenge delegation to the state gathering and, if necessary, at the national convention in Los Angeles. The Freedom in Action members, meanwhile,

appointed a delegation to go to Austin and declined to endorse Johnson. Similar stories took place in Dallas, Austin (Travis County), and El Paso, where liberals all bolted in opposition and hoped to take their case to the credentials committee at the state convention.\(^5\)

In contrast, in San Antonio, longtime civil rights and labor activists made a deal with Johnson supporters that allowed them to control the county convention, pass a series of unprecedentedly liberal resolutions, and finally appoint themselves as delegates to the gathering in Austin. The principle difference when compared to Houston, Dallas, and elsewhere was the power of San Antonio’s multiracial liberal alliance and the pragmatism of its leaders. A liberal ticket led by Franklin Spears, a white freshman incumbent, and attorney and Westside activist John Alaniz swept the city’s legislative races, giving the multiracial group of liberals and labor an edge at the precinct- and county-level conventions. Bexar County party chairman Jimmie Knight had campaigned hard for Johnson, but he lacked a clear majority in the local convention because a right-wing conservative group steadfastly refused to support LBJ. As the next biggest bloc, the “labor-Latin-Negro group led by Albert Peña” wielded tremendous power, enjoying entreaties from Knight, the conservatives’ Wade Cameron, and Mrs. Kathleen Voigt, head of a small “independent” liberal faction that supported Adlai Stevenson. The conservatives offered an uninstructed delegation to Austin, while Voigt hoped to attract the allies to the liberal Stevenson’s protest cause.

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Peña, along with labor leader Hank Brown and the Eastside’s G. J. Sutton, cut a deal with the Johnson forces in exchange for a seat at the table. Knight instructed his precinct chairmen to elect Peña chairman of the convention, and the Bexar County Democratic Coalition was born. Peña carried the chairman election 549-¼ to 397-½, defeating arch-conservative attorney Hubert Green (who would represent Handy Andy in response to civil rights protestors the following year). The formula for victory was clear to contemporaries: the Observer reported that “The Knight coalition included Johnson people, labor, East Side Democrats (Negroes), and West Side Democrats (Latin-Americans).” The latter three groups agreed to support Johnson at the state convention, while the Johnson backers signed off on a wide range of liberal resolutions, including a loyalty pledge, support for Mrs. Randolph’s re-election as national committeewoman, and an endorsement of the “students participating in the ‘sit-ins.’” Members of the Johnson-Daniel faction also joined the convention majority in going on record in opposition to the sales tax and in favor of school integration, the repeal of the right-to-work law, the creation of teacher tenure and teachers’ unions, old age medical insurance and “other welfare measures,” and finally, it “Called for equal rights for women.”

The “labor-Latin-Negro” alliance, tentatively forged in the late 1950s, had achieved a new level of power. Unlike previous experiments, this victory was not a flash in the pan but the first signal of a permanent realignment of Bexar County politics. Jimmie Knight got Johnson approved, Peña was elected chairman, G. J. Sutton chaired the resolutions committee, and Hank Brown chaired the delegates committee (which also included Rev. Black). The coalition forwarded the most radical set of resolutions ever
passed by a Democratic county convention in Texas (if not the South), along with the state’s most diverse delegation to the convention in Austin. Pages upon pages of photographs filled up the next week’s issue of SNAP, which celebrated the accomplishments of not only Sutton and Black but also Peña, Gus Garcia, and several white liberals (and black conservatives including Valmo Bellinger).

Mrs. Voigt, the leader of the “independent liberals located [mostly] in the upper-income north side precincts,” attacked Peña, a longtime Stevenson supporter and leader of the local DOT club, for abandoning the liberal cause by “making a deal” with Knight. Hank Brown offered the coalition leaders’ reply to the group he called “swimming pool liberals”:

Sure we made a deal. It’s done every day in politics. A better word is compromise, which is a cardinal principle of the Democratic Party. Check the delegation list, and you will find the delegates are from every walk of life. There are labor union members, sure, but you will also find a corporation president and many businessmen on that list, along with many Latin-American and Negro citizens. You can’t call this undemocratic.

Longtime labor activists George and Latane Lambert, who had participated in a similar coalition over twenty years earlier, rounded out the Bexar County delegation.51

The effectiveness of the San Antonio model, the absolute failure of the “independent” white liberals’ confusion, and the successful horse-trading of the Johnson forces were all repeated at the state convention on June 11. Just as Peña and the “labor-

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51 “LBJ Backed; Loyalists Bolt 4 Counties,” and “Lyndon-Liberal Trade Prevails in San Antonio” (all quotations), Texas Observer, May 20, 1960, 1, 6; “Democratic Convention Held,” SNAP News, May 20, 1960, SABHC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 4. On the election of Spears, Alaniz, and the liberal slate, see Willie Morris, “A Chapter in Technique: Franklin Spears and the Bexar Coalition,” Texas Observer, July 29, 1960, 1-2. I give more credit to Alaniz and the non-white elements of the coalition than either Morris or Spears did. In fact, Morris approvingly quotes Spears making extremely paternalistic, white supremacist comments about his desire to have young, Anglo faces lead the ticket as well as barefoot “Latin” voters flocking to receive giveaway campaign “tokens.”
Latin-Negro group” became a hot commodity at the Bexar County convention, so too did San Antonio’s delegation represent the key swing vote in the factional struggle at the statewide gathering. Once again, Johnson’s forces were well organized and determined to control the convention’s outcome. Again, the liberals adopted what one delegate called a “holier than thou” position that resulted in a botched walkout and complete isolation. And again, Peña and Sutton transformed their marginal status into a position of strength which they parlayed into newfound power, recognition, and support for their own causes.

“The issue of the convention...was party loyalty,” said Alex Dickie, a delegate from Denton County (just north of Fort Worth) and vice-president of the DOT. He demanded a roll call vote on the loyalty pledge—the longtime liberal demand that the party’s delegates pledge themselves to the national ticket. But Johnson’s forces had already “psychologically cut the ground out from under” it, the Texas Observer reported, by adopting an alternate loyalty resolution with softer language specifying “that it was ‘understood’” by party officers and national delegates that acceptance of their respective posts “indicate[d]” that they would support the national ticket “in good faith.” This alternate pledge aimed to assuage the conservative county delegations while putting the nominees on record in order to prevent a threatened liberal walkout.52

For their part, Johnson’s backers believed that either the passage of the original pledge or a massive liberal bolt would embarrass their candidate, who desperately needed the appearance of a unified bloc from his home state as he prepared for the national

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convention in Los Angeles. Governor Daniel held a series of meetings at the mansion in the days before the state gathering, and politicking continued late into the night at the convention hotel. The leaders of the Texas State AFL-CIO, who had pledged themselves to participate in a walkout if the DOT pledge did not pass, met first with Daniel and then with Johnson and House Speaker Sam Rayburn the evening before the opening gavel. The next morning they backtracked, instructing the caucus of labor delegates from various counties to soften their stance on the loyalty issue and not bolt no matter what. The union members angrily rejected their leaders’ pleas, opting instead for an “every man on his own” policy toward the walkout. DOT leaders Frankie Randolph and Creekmore Fath continued to push the loyalty-or-else position, hoping to keep the convention’s few liberals in line. They had a sound truck and grandstand set up a few blocks away at Barton Springs park, ready and waiting to hold the rump convention. Bexar County’s group was the only large liberal-led delegation, but its chairman, Albert Peña, was nowhere to be found.\footnote{Ibid, 2-3; “Development of the Liberals’ Debacle,” \textit{Texas Observer}, June 17, 1960, 5.}

Peña later recalled what transpired:

> About four o’clock in the morning, I had a call from a friend of Johnson, they said that the Majority Leader wants you to have breakfast. I said, “It is four o’clock in the morning,” “He wants you to have breakfast with him.”...So I got up, and when I got there, he had already talked to the other members of the coalition and the only thing he wanted was a promise that we wouldn’t walk out. Because it would embarrass him for his, for the people in Texas to walk out on the convention...

Johnson told him that he had spoken with the labor delegates from Bexar County and promised them help in Washington. “And the Blacks,” Peña remembered. Johnson
had, they had gotten together with G. J. He had promised them they would...send the first Black delegate from Bexar County to the national convention... So I said, “these guys have already made a deal, come on, I want to go along with them.” But they had a reason to fight... We weren’t going to walk out, but nobody said that. He said, “Now what do you want?” I said, “I want two things. I want Mexicano representation to the national convention and I want you to place someone on the platform committee...from Bexar County that will vote for the majority civil rights plank that is going to be presented.” He said, “OK.” So I was one of the delegates, G. J. Sutton was one of the delegates, they had a labor man [Jack] Martin...The coalition was represented for the first time in the national convention.54

Peña and company had managed the pre-convention politicking perfectly to their satisfaction. The Eastside and Westside would have unprecedented representation at the Democratic National Convention, and the coalition would stand and be counted in support of a strong national civil rights plank.

Still, the longtime organizers took out an insurance policy, using the floor debate over Dickie’s motion to demand publicly that the party leaders help the county coalition’s slate of candidates for the state legislature, including the re-election bid of State Senator Henry B. Gonzalez. The Texas Observer summed up the proceedings:

In a dramatic, on-the-floor convention caucus [of the Bexar County delegation] in which promises were announced from Sen. Johnson and Gov. Daniel to help elect liberal San Antonio legislative candidates over Republican opposition in November, in return for no bolt, Maury Maverick Jr.’s plea for the liberals’ loyalty pledge...was defeated, three to one. Peña, leader of the Latin-Americans within the delegation, and G. J. Sutton, Negro leader from Bexar, both sided with the Johnson forces against the extra pledge. The decision of the Bexar caucus broke the back of the bolt from inside the convention.

54 Albert A. Peña, interview by José Ángel Gutiérrez, CMAS 15, Tejano Voices Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries [hereinafter TV-UTA], 21-22.
In the end, only five or six delegates from Bexar went through with the walkout. Maverick, a longtime supporter of Peña and the county coalition, stayed inside, as did George and Latane Lambert, Hank Brown, and all of San Antonio’s labor caucus. Dickie cast the tie-breaking vote in his own county caucus—against his own motion and the liberal walkout. Led by Peña, Bexar County cast its 315 votes against the motion.

Several labor activists, including Brown and the Lamberts, voted in the caucus for Dickie, but another, a rumper from Dallas, conceded that the walkout was “shot to hell.” About 200 DOT members assembled in the heat on a hilltop overlooking Barton Springs, but only fifteen or so wore official delegate badges. Mrs. Randolph conceded a complete defeat, which also signaled her own removal as a national committeewoman. The mother of white Texas liberalism had lost her seat, foundered on the shoals of a multiracial civil rights coalition that had overtaken her vision and eclipsed her leadership.

The favorite son Johnson easily won the state convention’s endorsement, 2,252 to 40. The dissenters were likely the Freedom in Action group from Randolph’s home of Harris County, a group that assembled in a corner of the convention hall in Austin under a massive Confederate flag. Creekmore Fath, the other longtime liberal DOT organizer, criticized labor and Peña for cutting deals and abandoning the walkout. But it was a failed plan from the outset, noted one writer in the Observer. The various county bolts meant that labor and liberal delegates in Harris, Travis, Dallas, and El Paso counties would all need to win challenges before the credentials committee before their votes would be counted, and even if all of them had been seated, they would not have had a majority of the convention. They might have lost on the loyalty pledge anyway. As it
was, each of their delegations was refused, with only Latane Lambert dissenting in each credentials vote. Bexar County’s caucus of 315 represented nearly all of the seated delegates who could properly rump. The other challenge delegations were merely ignored, as were the handful of dissidents in the park. Johnson “shelled, isolated, and slaughtered” the liberals and moved on.55

For his part, Peña defended his stance. He had never committed himself to the pledge-or-walkout binary. He was reportedly “dubious” when only a third of a pre-convention meeting of would-be rumpers signaled that they would reasonably be seated at the convention. Peña openly discussed the terms of the deal, telling the Observer that he, Sutton, and Martin traded votes and “Johnson is to send money into the campaigns for [Bexar County] Democratic nominees for the [state] House and Senate; Daniel is to campaign on the spot, physically, for the legislative nominees...including Sen. Henry Gonzalez.” Peña added that he “had four groups he was trying to keep together for the November election.” In other words, maintaining the coalition of liberal ethnic Mexicans, African Americans, labor, and Knight’s Johnson Democrats was paramount to winning the legislative races and furthering his long-term goals. G. J. Sutton agreed, voting against the loyalty pledge and the walkout in order to gain representation at both the national convention and in local politics.56

56 “Development of the Liberals’ Debacle,” Texas Observer, June 17, 1960, 5; “Delegates to National Demo-Convention,” SNAP News, June 24, 1960, SABHC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 4. Sutton was one of only four “district delegates” from Bexar County. Knight and a white state committeewoman were alternates. Peña and Spears were two of three local “delegates-at-large.”
The Texas State AFL-CIO’s weekly newspaper also defended its leaders’ apparent about-face, drawing comparisons to the great mythic battles of the Texas Revolution.

The liberal movement in Texas has been disposed for too many years to seek out a succession of Goliads and Alamos in which it could fight to its mortal end. This is a fine endeavor for liberals who carry only responsibility for their personal conduct and not the additional responsibility of what happens to the farmers . . . or the working men and women . . . when they guess wrong... As for labor, if we could have changed the results we would have. Since we couldn’t we will busy ourselves getting ready for San Jacinto.  

Like Peña and Sutton, labor won a seat at the table and lived on to fight another day.

* * *

Lyndon Johnson carried the Texas convention and avoided an embarrassing walkout, but he failed to secure the Democratic nomination for president. Johnson campaigned desperately at the Los Angeles gathering, but he did not participate in the primaries, and John F. Kennedy ended up securing the nomination. The Texas delegation was shell-shocked, and Gov. Price Daniel initially indicated that he would not campaign for the Senator from Massachusetts. But Kennedy’s “surprise” choice of LBJ as his running-mate reenergized Johnson’s supporters in Texas and across the South. The latter’s “presence on the ticket assuages Southern resentment of the strongest civil rights plank in the party’s history,” the Observer reported. “But it also threatens to alienate some Negro and labor voters.”

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58 “Jack Takes LBJ on Ticket” and “Daniel Says He’ll Vote, That’s All,” Texas Observer, July 15, 1960, 1.
It was indeed a delicate balancing act for Kennedy, but the combined ticket provided still more new opportunities for black and brown civil rights organizers in Texas. Thanks to their support of Johnson at the state convention, G. J. Sutton and Albert Peña gained entrée to the highest circles of the Democratic Party in Los Angeles, including an initially secret meeting in which the two candidates directly addressed Johnson’s record on civil rights before the gathering’s black delegates. Peña recalls that Texas’s representative on the platform committee initially planned to vote against the strong civil rights plank, but Peña objected. He went to Price Daniel and explained that Johnson had promised him a yes vote on the issue. Daniel was incredulous, but at that moment, Sam Rayburn walked in to the room. Rayburn affirmed that Peña was correct and instructed the delegate to vote for the civil rights resolution. So “Johnson kept his word,” Peña later remembered. Back at the secret meeting with the black delegates, Peña and Sutton looked on as LBJ promised to follow Kennedy’s lead and support the party platform, including the civil rights plank. The Bexar County coalition’s stand had paid off.  

It paid off again soon after the convention, when Kennedy campaign staffer Carlos McCormick came to San Antonio to meet with Peña. McCormick “said that he had contacted people throughout South Texas” in search of a chairman for the campaign’s “Latin American division” in Texas. In fact, Peña himself had been queried by state organizer Gerald Mann. Peña had recommended Hector Garcia and several other leaders of the American G. I. Forum as well as his own assistant, Albert Fuentes. Peña

also suggested that G. J. Sutton chair the “Negro division” of the campaign, adding, “I’m sure many recognized Mr. Sutton’s leadership abilities as a delegate from Texas” in Los Angeles. Unsurprisingly, Jerry Holleman, the head of the Texas State AFL-CIO, had been chosen to head up the labor wing of the campaign, but rumors swirled concerning the Latin-American nominee. When he came to San Antonio, McCormick told Peña that “the majority” wanted him to take the job.  

Peña agreed to do so, but he first stated several conditions. “Number one,” he told McCormick, “that we will be recognized as a political... force in Texas...and we will only work directly with the Kennedy’s and not... with the state Democratic party, because they have sold us out too many times.” Peña also asked for “some top level appointments.” McCormick agreed, but again Peña wanted a guarantee. They called Robert Kennedy, the candidate’s brother and a campaign manager, and repeated Peña’s demands. Kennedy agreed to his terms.  

The result was the formation of the Viva Kennedy clubs and indeed a new “political force in Texas.” Henry B. Gonzalez became the division’s honorary co-chair, while Peña did the nitty-gritty work. He immediately hit the road, criss-crossing South Texas to organize clubs in each county. He often met up with longtime labor activists and leaders of LULAC and the American G. I. Forum, which he had joined in 1950 during his first civil rights case. Many of them had already begun forming clubs on their

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60 Peña interview by Gutiérrez, 25; Letter from Albert Peña to Gerald Mann, August 29, 1960, and Letter from Ed Idar, Jr., to Albert Peña, August 31, 1960—both in Eduardo Idar, Jr. Papers [hereinafter Ed Idar Papers], Benson Latin American Collection [hereinafter BLAC], the University of Texas at Austin Libraries, Box 8, Folder 5.  
61 Peña interview by Gutiérrez, 25-26; Albert Peña, “County Comment,” SNAP News, August 18, 1961, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3; “Minutes of PASO Meeting,” Hamilton Hotel, Laredo, December 27, 1961, 1, copy in Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 2.
own. G. I. Forum Executive Director Ed Idar wrote to Peña just before McCormick’s visit, informing him that he had formed a group in Hidalgo County in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. “This Club is supposed to work hand in hand with the county organization on behalf of the ticket down here,” Idar told him, “while at the same time giving the liberal faction among the Latinos an opportunity to work within their own organization to see if we can get a maximum vote out in November...”\(^{62}\)

The same philosophy undergirded the formation of Viva Kennedy clubs across the state. Peña contacted longtime labor and civil rights activists in each town. He later recalled that “we decided that we were not going to accept any money from anybody. We were going to do it on our own. We sold one dollar memberships...If you didn’t have a dollar, you became a member anyway.” County-by-county across the Valley, and from one big city to the next, “we organized, we organized,” Peña said. In Houston, Peña contacted John J. Herrera of LULAC Council # 60 and Roy Elizondo, a local leader in Henry B.’s 1958 gubernatorial campaign who had since organized the growing Civic Action Committee. In Dallas, he contacted UAW activists Pancho Medrano and Franklin Garcia, both of whom became officers in the local Viva Kennedy club. In Fort Worth, G.I. Forum state officer Gilbert Garcia helped launch the local club, where he was soon joined by Mary Salinas and other members of the UPWA. Back home in Bexar County, Peña’s assistant, Albert Fuentes, shared organizing duties with Henry B. Gonzalez’s right-hand-man, Lalo Solis.\(^{63}\)

\(^{62}\) Letter from Idar to Peña, August 31, 1960, Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 8, Folder 5.
\(^{63}\) Peña interview by Gutiérrez, 26-27. On Houston, see de Leon, 167. Add notes / or see below on Dallas, FrW.
While Peña and countless ethnic Mexican labor and civil rights activists organized the “Latin-American division” of the Kennedy campaign, African American activists across the state were likewise rallying around the Democratic ticket. In late September, a “state-wide group of Negro leaders,” probably the Texas Council of Voters, met in Austin and voted to endorse the Kennedy-Johnson ticket “after lengthy debate.”

On October 23 in Houston, the HCCO brought together its sixty member organizations to discuss the presidential race. The Chronicle reported that their decision might affect the decisions of some 45,000 African American likely voters in Harris County. “The council’s endorsed candidates in the past four or five years have won the Negro vote,” the paper continued. “...After strong pro-Republican opposition led by George T. Nelson, long advocate of civil rights for Negroes,” the HCCO endorsed Kennedy and Johnson. Nelson, a onetime supporter of segregationist governor Allan Shivers, likely calculated a Republican victory and hoped that an endorsement of Nixon would result in patronage. Moses and Erma LeRoy joined the majority in supporting the Democrats, and the council’s other black unionists likely did the same. Following the endorsement, the HCCO began “working feverously” to coordinate the campaign with leaders of precinct organizations, fraternal lodges, and civic associations, the paper added. Over 70,000 black voters were registered in the county, making the estimate of 45,000 HCCO votes both attainable and potentially decisive.64

64 “Negro Council Endorses Kennedy, Johnson; Prefers Platform of Dems,” Houston Chronicle, October 24, 1960; “Negro Clubs to Discuss Candidates,” Houston Chronicle, October 13, 1960—both in HCM-HMRC, HCCO.
Meanwhile in San Antonio, G. J. Sutton returned home from Los Angeles convinced that Johnson was “committed to the [party] platform,” and he quickly went to work organizing the Eastside on behalf of the Democratic ticket. As usual, Coleman’s SNAP News went all out for the activists’ chosen candidates. “There is only one way to Vote Nov. 8,” the paper proclaimed four days before the election, “The Democratic Ticket.” The editors “could go on and on relating hundreds of reasons why,” it continued, but two main reasons stuck out. The first was local: “The Democratic Party is one big happy Family, and we are a part of the family. We have been included in everything democratic in Bexar County. G. J. Sutton was elected as a delegate to the National Convention.” Second, the Democratic nominee was a proven supporter of black civil rights. “When Rev. Martin Luther King was recently jailed, it was the Kennedy Camp [that came] to Rev. King’s aid...” SNAP concluded that readers should vote the entire ticket, including Henry B. Gonzalez for state Senate, and the Franklin Spears-led liberal-Latin coalition slate for state representatives. 65

In the final days and weeks of the campaign, the Eastside activists held a series of events and rallies in support of the ticket. On October 25, the Bexar County Democratic Women held a reception in honor of national Democratic women, featuring “Mrs. Lyndon Johnson, Mrs. Robert Kennedy... and Mrs. Jean Kennedy Smith, sister-in-law of Sen. Kennedy.” Between 3,100 and 3,500 people attended the gathering, which was co-hosted by Mrs. Maury Maverick, Sr., the late ex-mayor and former Congressman’s wife. Lou Nelle Sutton, G. J.’s wife, also “served as one of the hostesses,” while longtime labor

65 “Says Snap...” SNAP News, November 4, 1960, SABHC MS 139, Box 2, Folder 4.
organizer Latane Lambert was an officer in the local democratic women’s club. On Sunday, October 30, Mr. and Mrs. G. J. Sutton hosted a morning coffee honoring the Democratic candidates. A multiracial group of approximately 150 people, which included Henry B. and legislative candidate John Alaniz, attended the gathering at the Suttons’ home. Finally, Lyndon Johnson and Gov. Daniel followed through on their promise to campaign for the liberal Democrats in Bexar County’s legislative races. In addition to providing funding throughout and touring the city with Kennedy in September, Johnson came to San Antonio for his last speech prior to the election. G. J. Sutton, Albert Peña, Gus Garcia, and John Alaniz all greeted LBJ at the airport, joining the rally at “the end of the trail.”

Of course, the Kennedy-Johnson ticket narrowly prevailed in both Texas and nationally on November 8. They carried the Lone Star State by less than 50,000 votes out of over 2 million cast, and Nixon’s campaign charged voter fraud and initially refused to accept the results. “Landslide Lyndon” had almost certainly drawn on South Texas bosses when he won the 1948 Senate race by 87 votes, so it was by no means out of the question that some chicanery continued in 1960.

Yet the candidates and most observers credited the dramatic increase in African American and ethnic Mexican voters with carrying the state. Two days after the election,

Kennedy fired of a series of telegrams to Albert Peña, Ed Idar, and a number of other leaders from the campaign’s “Latin-American” division. “Congratulations on the magnificent job turned in by the Viva Kennedy Clubs in Texas,” Kennedy wrote. “The margin of victory in Bexar, Nueces, and El Paso counties and the Rio Grande Valley was a prominent significance in carrying Texas.” Peña later added that the 1960 turnout was the highest percentage ever of ethnic Mexican voter participation, and that their support for the ticket was “instrumental” in putting Texas back in the Democratic column. The Westside of San Antonio gave Kennedy-Johnson a victory of 17,000 to 3,000 for Nixon (nearly 6-to-1).

Meanwhile, the African American vote in Texas followed the national pattern, going overwhelmingly for Kennedy. Some “dominantly Negro” precincts in Texas went as much as 10-to-1 for the Democrats, while Kennedy carried the entire Eastside of San Antonio by a 3-to-1 margin. (Valmo Bellinger and other conservative blacks had aligned themselves with the Good Government League and the GOP.) Statewide, the black vote stopped the Democrats’ bleeding in Harris, Dallas, and Tarrant (Fort Worth) counties, while the “Latin-Americans” carried the next three largest urban counties: Bexar, El Paso and Nueces (Corpus Christi).

Thus the Bexar County Democratic Coalition and its constituent parts again asserted their collective importance in state politics, providing the critical organization and votes to narrowly deliver Texas to Kennedy and Johnson. In so doing, they laid a foundation for increased activity within the Democratic Party and proved again that they deserved a seat at the table. Peña and the Viva Kennedy clubs brought diverse elements
of the ethnic Mexican civil rights struggle together into a coordinated state-wide
campaign, while black voting power delivered the punch promised by the sit-ins. The
door opened a little bit wider.  

**The New Texas State AFL-CIO**

While the presidential election of 1960 raised the profile of African American and
ethnic Mexican civil rights and political activists in Texas, it also had unforeseen
consequences for the state’s labor movement. Kennedy and Johnson wasted little time
after the election in selecting the longtime president of the Texas AFL-CIO, Jerry
Holleman, to serve as one of the three Assistant Secretaries of the U.S. Department of
Labor. Holleman, who left Texas to go to Washington in early January, 1961, would
work on national labor policy and oversee the President’s Committee on Equal
Employment Opportunity. Speculation abounded that the patronage placement resulted
from labor’s support for LBJ in the nomination process. Whatever its cause, his
departure left a vacancy in Texas, and into the void jumped a plumber from San Antonio
named H.S. “Hank” Brown.

Brown brought a vast knowledge of the state’s labor movement, his own
experiences in the Bexar County Democratic Coalition, a militant brand of organizing-
focused trade unionism to the presidency of the Texas State AFL-CIO. He had served for

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68 All numbers cited in “Religion Helped, Not Hurt Kennedy,” *Texas Observer*, November 11, 1960;
Telegram from John F. Kennedy to Ed Idar, November 10, 1960, Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 8, Folder 5;
posted a note to Mr. Ike Jones and Bellinger in *SNAP* on November 18, chiding them for not supporting
Kennedy at “little confo” among the activists at Van Courtlandt’s Cocktail party at the Kelly Officers Club.
SABHC, MS 139, Box 2, Folder 4.
six years as the state federation’s Education Director, had led and won the longest strike in the history of the San Antonio’s building trade unions, and had been elected executive secretary of the statewide Building and Construction Trades Council. He had also allied himself with the growing, predominately-ethnic Mexican industrial union in San Antonio and joined with Peña and Sutton in a powerful, multiracial electoral coalition.  

Brown thus had impeccable credentials in labor circles and the unusual practical experience of having participated in multiracial political partnerships. The former fact got him elected president; the latter provided his vision, bringing San Antonio-style labor, civil rights, and electoral strategies to bear in state politics. The transformation was not immediate, but by the time he was through with it, Brown had largely transformed the Texas AFL-CIO into a civil rights organization and the driving force behind a statewide, multiracial, liberal coalition.

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To be sure, the Texas AFL-CIO had already begun to embrace the growing black and brown civil rights movements, passing a compromise civil rights resolution at its founding convention in 1957 (see chapter 2). Under Jerry Holleman, the old TSFL hired a part-time advisor on “Latin-American Affairs,” a resident of the Rio Grande Valley whose primary responsibility was to maintain a relationship with the official Mexican labor movement, the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM). Yet the advisor, Andrew C. McLellan, was also active in ethnic Mexican political and civil rights circles in South Texas, and his job for the TSFL included doing “anything we could to

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70 See chapter 3; Brown interview by author; “Labor’s New President,” Texas Observer, January 28, 1961, 5.
assist our own [Texas] citizens of Latin-American descent.” McLellan, known as “Andy” or “Mac,” developed a close friendship and rapport with Holleman, sending the state president regular reports on his activities. In 1953, McLellan and G.I. Forum activist Ed Idar (later a leader of Viva Kennedy clubs) co-authored the report “What Price Wetbacks?,” a detailed study of the use of undocumented Mexican workers and the negative effects it had on ethnic Mexican U.S. citizens and the Texas economy. In 1954, McLellan, Idar, and other ethnic Mexican activists used labor money to organize together around the gubernatorial candidacy of Ralph Yarborough, and a year later both the TSFL and the Texas State CIO Council sponsored their efforts to organize a training conference for liberal, labor, and civil rights-oriented Democrats across the Rio Grande Valley.71

In short, the state labor movement, based in Austin and led by white union activists, worked through McLellan, an ethnic Mexican, to develop close ties to ethnic Mexican political clubs and civil rights groups in South Texas, most notably the G. I. Forum and local LULAC chapters. His work gave the labor movement a degree of credibility among ethnic Mexican activists and laid the foundation for future collaboration in the region. Most importantly, McLellan contributed to the civil rights activists’ causes: fighting the “wetback problem” and the continuation of the bracero temporary labor program as well as organizing for better political representation. These were some of the G.I. Forum’s top priorities, and McLellan brought both much-needed

71 Quotation in letter from Jerry Holleman to Robert P. Sanchez, April 1, 1960, 1, in Texas AFL-CIO Records, 1951-1971, AR110, Series 7, Mexican American Affairs Committee [hereinafter MAAC, AR110-7], Box 2, Folder 1, UTA-TLA. Also see letter from Andy McLellan to Paul Sparks, June 29, 1953, MAAC, AR110-7-1-2; Letters from Andy McLellan to Jerry R. Holleman, September 6 and 7, 1955, MAAC, AR110-7-1-3; “Rio Grande Democratic Club Training Conference, McAllen, Texas,” minutes, October 30, 1955, MAAC, AR110-7-1-3; “Statement of Andrew C. McLellan...on HR 3822,” March 21, 1955, MAAC, AR110-7-1-3.
interest and financial resources from organized labor. McLellan turned down a job with the Texas Teamsters in 1954 and ended up going to work for ORIT, the Inter-American Regional Workers’ Organization (Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores), the following year.\(^72\)

Prior to the 1957 merger convention of the Texas AFL-CIO, Holleman and other officers worked to revive the temporary Latin American Affairs Convention Committee, and they began making new contacts in the Valley to replace McLellan. Robert P. “Bob” Sanchez, a G.I. Forum officer who soon became law partners with Ed Idar in McAllen, ended up being their main contact in the region. In January, 1957, Sanchez worked with the state federation in developing a Spanish-language pamphlet for use in that year’s poll tax drive, gathering statements from a wide range of “eminent” ethnic Mexican civil rights activists. George I. Sanchez (no relation), an outspoken education professor and New Deal activist at the University of Texas, urged readers, “For your children’s children, for your town, for your country—pay your poll tax.” The pamphlet concluded, “Sea ciudadano de primera categoria—Be a first class citizen...”\(^73\) Dr. Hector P. Garcia of Corpus Christi, the president of the G. I. Forum, refused to contribute a quotation for

\(^72\) Letter from Andy McLellan to Jerry Holleman, October 19, 1954, MAAC, AR110-7-1-2. In 1955, McLellan took a trip to Mexico in collaboration with the CTM, the Texas AFL-CIO, and ORIT. His letters to Holleman quickly became sporadic, and the few that came were filled with reports of trips to Guatemala and Honduras, where he had joined local anti-communist unions in fighting the leftist revolutions that were sweeping the region. He eventually resigned his post as Latin American Affairs advisor to the Texas state federation, but the position was effectively vacant for most of 1956 and 1957. At some point, McLellan became an agent for the Central Intelligence Agency. He later returned to the U.S. and founded the CIA and AFL-CIO’s joint venture in Latin America, the American Institute for Free Labor Development, in 1962. See additional correspondence in MAAC, AR110-7, Box 1, Folder 4; and Dana Frank conference paper.

\(^73\) “La Importancia del Poll Tax,” Texas AFL-CIO Records, AR110, Series 8, Committee On Political Education [COPE], Box 9, Folder 2, translations by author. The Spanish for the Sanchez quotation is: “Por sus hijos hijos, por su pueblo, por su patria—pague su poll tax.” “Patria” could also mean “homeland,” in reference to Mexico.
fear that his name would be associated with organized labor, which might then discredit the G. I. Forum among conservative ethnic Mexicans. The Texas State AFL-CIO through Bob Sanchez explained that the pamphlet would not have the name of state federation, nor the Forum, nor LULAC, nor any other organization. Yet Garcia still worried that his detractors would discover that the pamphlet was printed at labor’s headquarters and expense and would use that information against his organization. Nonetheless, Garcia “did say that even though he was staying out this time he could use a good number of copies to distribute...” Labor thus remained toxic in South Texas in 1957, though some common ground could be found when it came to politics.74

For the next several years, with R.P. “Bob” Sanchez serving as its liaison to ethnic Mexican civil rights and political organizations, the state federation gradually gained a more complete understanding of the struggles of ordinary mexicanos in South Texas. At the merger convention in 1957, the Latin American Affairs Convention Committee adopted a set of resolutions that focused primarily on the U.S.-Mexico border and relations between the two countries’ national and state labor movements. It recommended that “every effort should be made to organize groups on both sides of the border for...mutual benefits,” and it added a single paragraph on improving the livelihood of “tax-paying United States citizens” in the Lower Rio Grande Valley who were forced to work as migrant farm laborers due to job competition from “alien workers.” 75


75 Proceedings, 1957, 130. Pancho Medrano of the UAW in Dallas and Ray Shafer of the Teamsters in San Antonio were among the fifteen committee members (29).
But the next year Sanchez, who began sending monthly reports to the state AFL-CIO officers in January, 1958, pushed the committee and the state leadership toward an increased focus on the issues facing ethnic Mexicans within Texas.\textsuperscript{76} Jack Martin of San Antonio chaired the convention committee, which briefly reiterated the need for bi-national labor cooperation before focusing most of its report on domestic issues. “It was noted that the influx of braceros forces resident workers to migrate away from their homes...depressing their entire economic standard...” and causing “social and economic chaos” in both the U.S. and in Mexico. “The committee feels, therefore, that [by] continuing the program we are doing no service to our brothers in Mexico...” and it finally resolved “that the State AFL-CIO do everything within its power to bring about the abolition of the bracero program.” The committee also brought up—for the first time—ongoing issues of discrimination against “Americans of Latin American descent” by local unions “in some localities.” Such practices, the committee “realize[d],” were “purely a local grievance,” so it concluded tentatively that “it shall be the duty of the local labor movement to take all possible steps to encourage the elimination of these conditions.\textsuperscript{77} Finally, the committee brought up another longtime grievance of ethnic Mexican activists in the region: the issue of cross-border “commuters.” Unlike braceros, who worked on temporary visas while living in the U.S., these Mexican workers obtained permanent visas to work and live in Texas but did so while continuing to live across the Rio Grande in Mexico. They commuted back and forth across the border daily, working

\textsuperscript{76} Letter from R.P. (Bob) Sanchez to Jerry Holleman (Report No. 1), January 6, 1958, MAAC, AR110-7-1-5.  
\textsuperscript{77} Proceedings, 1958, 21, 193-195 (quotations on 194). Dallas UAW activist Franklin Garcia and San Antonio Laborers’ union official Willie Maldonado both served on the committee.
for wages that were considered sub-standard in Texas while benefiting from the lower cost of living in Mexico. Sanchez and the committee argued that the practice lowered wages and caused unemployment among U.S. citizens, including ethnic Mexicans.\footnote{Ibid, 195. Paul Montemayor, of the Steelworkers in Corpus, suggested that the report be amended to recommend that U.S. unions in the border regions change their constitutions to permit non-citizens to join their ranks, thereby encouraging organization of immigrant workers. Montemayor’s amendment passed.}

Bob Sanchez played a critical role in the Latin American Affairs Committee’s transition from international to local affairs. After the 1958 convention, he wrote to Texas State AFL-CIO president Jerry Holleman with his opinion of the proceedings. He noted that he and A. A. Rodriguez of Houston needed to fight hard through a long, “explosive” debate in order to pass the resolution to abolish the bracero program. Rodriguez won the battle by pointing out that it was “just another big sweat shop.” Sanchez also reported that he had introduced the “border commuter problem,” though “it was not foreign to a number of committee members.” He added a long, passionate plea for continuing to focus on the problems of ethnic Mexicans in the U.S.:

If you will permit me I would like to say a word about the future conduct [of] this committee. One of the questions that was raised...was the extent of the committee’s scope...The question became crucial when this fellow Rodriguez brought up the matter of possible discrimination by some locals against Mexican-Americans here in Texas... He pointed out, with much reason I think, that we don’t have to reach down to Latin America to find constructive issues to solve regarding Latin American problems; we have them right here in Texas...

My own personal opinion is that...work should constantly be done to improve relations between the Latin American element of the state and organized labor. Work should be done to sell the idea of organized labor to the Latin people of the state. Work should be done to sell the political philosophy of organized labor to the Latin people of the state. Efforts should be made to eradicate any and all discriminatory practices on the part of some locals against some Latins seeking jobs where a union is
operating. More literature should be put out in all the fields of labor printed in Spanish. And by all means, organized labor should put more emphasis on poll tax programs affecting Latins in the state.\textsuperscript{79}

Sanchez’s opinion quickly became the policy of the state labor movement. The next year, Holleman appointed A. A. Rodriguez to chair the Latin American Affairs convention committee. The group reaffirmed the positions of the previous convention and added the need to fight to improve the working conditions and wages of agricultural laborers in the state. It called for a new minimum wage law for farm workers and the extension of “all the benefits guaranteed to the bracero” to “domestic migrant workers” for as long as the bracero program continued. The committee also recommended a new “public relations and educational” drive to organize unorganized workers, “with special emphasis to those concentrated along the Texas-Mexico border.” Finally, it demanded a “Congressional investigation into the alien labor commuters.”\textsuperscript{80} Sanchez praised Holleman for supporting Rodriguez as chairman. “I have often argued in various circles that there are no better experts on Latin American Affairs than we damn Mexicans,” he exclaimed. Moreover, “It was pleasing to me to see the Committee turn its attention more to internal affairs” and that “this year there were more of our own Mexican-American (Latins) attending our Convention from within the ranks of labor.” The latter mattered because “the Latin population of the State is growing by leaps and bounds,

\textsuperscript{79} Letter from R.P. (Bob) Sanchez to Jerry Holleman (Report No. 12), October 29, 1958, MAAC, AR110-7-1-5.

\textsuperscript{80} Proceedings, 1959, 105-106.
[and] it is important to see that this segment of the population is instructed in the cause of labor and in overall democratic philosophy [sic].”

Organized labor and the ethnic Mexican civil rights struggle were thus becoming more and more intertwined, as Bob Sanchez instructed the state federation officers and Latin American Affairs Committee on the labor issues facing the majority of South Texas’s workers. The *bracero*, commuter, and agricultural labor “problems” were longstanding grievances of ethnic Mexican activists, just as they undercut labor’s efforts to organize unions in the region. This common ground brought the two very separate struggles together, as did their mutual need for one another in the arena of electoral politics.

It was not always an easy relationship. In fact, there is considerable evidence that Sanchez often struggled to make ends meet while carrying out labor’s program in the Rio Grande Valley. In early 1960, Sanchez billed the state federation for his services, asking for “lawyer rates” of $50 per day. Holleman countered that he was not hiring a lawyer and could only afford to pay “worker rates.” Labor does not need an attorney, Holleman wrote. “It does require a person whose heart and sympathies are with the Latin people...[and] who is effective...in the Latin community...” Holleman acknowledged that being aligned with labor could cost Sanchez in terms of customers at his law practice and in terms of prestige in the community. But the job did not call for “a person who feels any compulsion for respectability.” Rather, Holleman added, “It must always be remembered that anyone [who] succeeds in improving the social, economic, and political

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81 Letter from R.P. (Bob) Sanchez to Jerry Holleman (Report No. 28), November 20, 1958, MAAC, AR110-7-1-5.
lot of the Latin community...will automatically become controversial.” As for the financial implications of their arrangement, “There is inevitably a period of struggle.” Just as workers who go on strike face reprisals and economic hardships, so too do community organizers and political activists experience personal and professional difficulties. “You are going through your most difficult period,” Holleman told Sanchez in April, 1960.

You are so near success, politically, that you are at your most controversial period. You can either slow down and become less controversial...or you can give that extra surge or push that is needed to elect your friends and thereby become more respectable. During the period of that “extra push” you are going to be very unpopular with your enemies. You can make either choice.82

Sanchez decided to stick it out, and the result was an unprecedented victory for the Latin-labor coalition in South Texas. “The jubilation down here is tremendous,” Sanchez wrote to Holleman days after the election of Kennedy and Johnson in November. “My fat head is so full of beams yet and my imagination so overwhelmed that I cannot sit here and give you every detail of the campaign but I can tell you at this time that unquestionably the thing that carried it was the unification and organization of the Latin people throughout this area.” Sanchez and Idar’s Viva Kennedy Club in Hidalgo County, the largest along the border, had biweekly formal meetings and countless activities “down to the community level.” A long string of appearances by dignitaries including Albert Peña, Ralph Yarborough, and Henry B. Gonzalez helped the cause, as did the fact that “all the generals got off their tails and on their feet to work right

82 Letter from Jerry Holleman to R.P. (Bob) Sanchez, April 1, 1960, MAAC, AR110-7-2-1 (all quotations); Letter from R.P. (Bob) Sanchez to H.S. (Hank) Brown, February 3, 1961, MAAC, AR110-7-2-2.
along with the privates.” Labor’s financial support proved critical to their success, Sanchez added, especially in nearby Willacy County, which they carried despite “plenty of gloom.” As Sanchez toured last-minute precincts in door to door canvassing, “Groups of little Mexican boys gathered at corner grocery stores would see me walking down and then would holler, ‘Viva Kennedy.’” The victory was “a complete restoration of faith and undoubtedly we can keep going forward.”

The national victory did not immediately translate into significant gains at the local level, and South Texas remained a bastion of low-wage, unorganized labor heavily controlled by a handful of economic elites and political bosses. Still, organized labor had thus made significant progress toward establishing ties with ethnic Mexican civil rights and political activists in the Valley, and Kennedy’s victory brought considerable hope to veteran organizers like Bob Sanchez. The “extra push” was still forthcoming, but labor and Latins alike had some psychological reinforcement that their strategy was working. While labor had begun to commit itself to the domestic affairs of the state’s “Latin American” residents, it had also made headway in relation to liberal politics and black civil rights. At the state Democratic convention in 1960, labor leaders asserted their independence from the broader “liberal movement” by scuttling the walkout and supporting LBJ. And that same year delegates to the Texas AFL-CIO convention passed

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the body’s strongest set of civil resolutions yet, explicitly supporting the sit-ins, fair employment, welfare spending, and a minimum wage for agricultural workers. 84

The victory in November validated each of those moves, but the pace of change within the Texas State AFL-CIO rapidly accelerated with Hank Brown’s arrival at its helm. Brown quickly moved to expand labor’s efforts among ethnic Mexicans, renew the federation’s commitment to the black civil rights struggle, and sow the seeds of a San Antonio-style political coalition at the statewide level.

When Holleman went to Washington, the Texas AFL-CIO executive board appointed Brown to the federation’s presidency on an interim basis. He immediately discovered that he could not work with his second-in-command, Secretary-Treasurer Fred Schmidt. Clashes between the two had resulted in Brown’s resignation from the state federation less than two years earlier, and the disputes continued once Brown took office. Schmidt, an oil worker, commenced his own campaign for the presidency, organizing resentment among members of old CIO industrial unions and forming a splinter caucus to air their grievances. The oil and telephone workers rallied other unions behind Schmidt, but Brown found strong support among steel and auto workers (the industrial unions had traditionally split along the same lines in battles for control of the state CIO, with oil-telephone coming out on top). With solid support from the craft unions, Brown survived Schmidt’s challenge and won what newspapers called “labor’s civil war” by a 2-to-1 margin at the federation’s late July, 1961, convention in Galveston. Brown was re-elected to a full term, and Roy R. Evans, a leader of the United Auto Workers massive

84 “Militant Resolves on All Fronts” and “Labor Breaks New Ground,” Texas Observer, August 12, 1960, 1, 4.
aircraft Local #893 in Grand Prairie (near Dallas), became the body’s secretary-treasurer.85

The “internecine battle” at the labor convention owed less to philosophical differences than to personality clashes, though the old animosities between the former AFL and CIO affiliates and within the old CIO also came to light. Both Brown and Schmidt were “liberals,” said one post-mortem report, and both “have stood together in past conventions, for example, [in support of] integration.”86 Both came from unions in which racial discrimination ran rampant. And both were committed to reversing labor’s fortunes in the face of repressive labor laws and increasing automation and job loss. Organized labor represented only one in six nonagricultural workers in Texas, half the national average of one in three.87

Yet Brown stressed “rallying the troops to the battles of picket-lines and elections,” while Schmidt advocated “community political education and gains for labor through political reform.” In either case, the president’s job would center on lobbying, but Brown’s emphasis remained outside of Austin. He wanted to “aggressively” expand the membership of organized labor and to win elections by bringing the San Antonio

87 Ibid. 1; “Labor’s New President,” 5; “Changing Times for Texas Labor,” Texas Observer, March 25, 1961, 9; “‘An Invisible Crisis,’” Texas Observer, August 5, 1961, 7. Labor’s declining fortunes could also be measured in its growing irrelevance to and misunderstanding by independent liberals, the Observer’s Ronnie Dugger argued. “Thoughts About Labor,” Texas Observer, August 26, 1960, 4-5.
model to statewide races. Drawing on his South Texas origins, Brown wanted to reverse the perception of organized labor in local and state affairs. He did not seek “respectability,” as Holleman had, but he believed that union organizers should be “looked upon as downright dangerous if not subversive.” The area that needed this most was the Rio Grande Valley, Brown believed. There, the Observer paraphrased Brown’s statement:

workers suspected of having union sympathies “unaccountably” discover one day that a sudden economy move at the cannery has lopped off their jobs, that no other employer in the region needs them, that their landlords absolutely have to have their home back, and that their credit is no longer good at the stores where they have been shopping for years.

Most of these workers, Brown was fully aware, were ethnic Mexicans, and they absolutely had to be organized for labor to succeed at a statewide level. He “relishe[d]” the idea of organizing the region’s farm workers, but upon taking office he “admitt[ed] it is a long way off.”

By winning “labor’s civil war,” Hank Brown brought a radical vision of new organizing and multiracial coalition politics to the state federation and by extension, Texas state politics.

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Immediately after Browns’s interim appointment to the presidency, Sanchez wrote and told him that he would like to continue to serve as the federation’s consultant on Latin-American Affairs. The two men were not strangers; as Education Director, Brown had long relied on Sanchez to help him arrange union and political meetings in the

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89 “Labor’s New President,” 5; Brown interview by Green.
Valley. They had likely worked together to develop ties between the AFL-CIO and the American G. I. Forum and had also crossed paths in various Democratic Party functions in South Texas. They addressed one another in a formal but friendly matter, and Brown gladly welcomed Sanchez onto his staff.90

Sanchez continued his tradition of attending the annual state labor convention, joining the meeting of the Latin American Affairs Committee during the controversial summer gathering of 1961. Sanchez drafted the “suggested resolutions” for the committee and sent them to Brown prior to the convention. The draft included new details on the fight against the *bracero* program, offering support for Sen. Eugene McCarthy’s proposed amendments to the program’s governing legislation, Public Law 78. Sanchez also drew attention to new developments surrounding the border commuter issue. A year earlier, in early 1960, a strike of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters had brought the issue to light after the employer, the Peyton Packing Company in El Paso, hired commuters as scabs. The union and the Texas State AFL-CIO brought a lawsuit “to test the legal status” of the commuters’ immigration classification. On July 8, Federal District Judge Luther Youngdahl ruled in the union’s favor, and the government did not appeal. Still, by the summer of 1961, the Department of Labor had launched an investigation into the issue but still failed to act on the new legal precedent. The Latin American Affairs Committee demanded that the decision be implemented.

The convention exceeded Sanchez’s proposals by making the committee permanent and charging it with advancing the case until its conclusion. In October 1961,

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the state federation filed suit in federal court on behalf of over two hundred individuals. They asked that the narrow Youngdahl ruling be extended to apply to the entire class of “commuters,” some 75,000 to 100,000 workers throughout the entire border region. Sanchez added: “The Committee shall very carefully note that many of these so-called commuters are our own labor movement brothers and others are Mexican national not yet in the labor movement. To all of these good people we in the labor movement of Texas extend a good neighborly invitation to come and live in the United States as the law provides...and we in no way want to hurt or injure [them].”

The new federal case was an unprecedented investment of labor movement resources into a longtime grievance of ethnic Mexican civil rights activists. Yet its immediate impact ultimately proved less important than its unintended consequences. By making the Latin American Affairs Committee permanent and assigning staff and volunteer union members to it, the Texas State AFL-CIO laid the foundation for a broader foray into labor, civil rights, and political organizing among ethnic Mexican workers across the state. Two years later, this initial commitment would become concrete, when the federation, led by Hank Brown launched an expansive organizing project named “Operation Bootstrap.” It would take some time for the fruits of the

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92 Ed Idar of American G.I. Forum (and Sanchez’s law partner) helped formulate the legal strategy for the “mandamus action.” Letter from Ed Idar, Jr., to Charles Morris, September 6, 1961, MAAC, AR110-7-1-1. Also see “Resume of the Texas AFL-CIO Latin American Affairs Committee Meeting Held in Laredo,” September 23, 1961, MAAC, AR110-7-1-1.
Committee’s labor to be realized, but the pieces were put in place by the fall of 1961. Hank Brown and Bob Sanchez were ready to move.

**Fits and Starts**

Efforts to build on the momentum of the Kennedy campaign proceeded in fits and starts. Ethnic Mexican activists quickly returned to work, transforming the Viva Kennedy clubs into a permanent organization and a new force in Texas politics. Their new group, the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASO), brought together a diverse collection of ethnic Mexican labor, civil rights, and political activists that all struggled to shape the organization’s program. Consequently, numerous factional disputes defined PASO’s formative years, but the victors of those internal battles ultimately rededicated the group to militant, liberal organizing and multiracial coalition-building. Meanwhile, even as the direct action phase of the black civil rights movement succeeded in desegregating public accommodations and carried forward the struggle for jobs and freedom, African Americans continued to search for footing in the political arena. Organized labor likewise sought to extend their influence, while white “independent” liberals hoped to find new ways to re-organize after their crushing defeat at the 1960 state Democratic convention.

Each group experimented separately with new tactics and alliances, while a handful of leaders from each bloc reacted to the surprising outcome of the 1961 special U.S. Senate election by tentatively coming together to find ways to collaborate. The result was a draft version of the Democratic Coalition, the first truly multiracial statewide
alliance in Texas history. Fissures would continue to separate its constituent parts until the aftermath of the gubernatorial election of 1962, when the narrow loss of a liberal integrationist candidate produced hard evidence of just how much power they could potentially wield—if they could turn their cautious joint forays into a more permanent alliance.

* * *

“PASO is a continuance of the Viva Kennedy movement,” Albert Peña wrote in his “County Comment” column in SNAP News in August, 1961. “Latin-Americans realize they must participate more fully in the political community. They must learn the techniques of politics.” The organization did not practice “segregation in reverse,” as some of its critics have charged, Peña added, and all who want to improve the condition of ethnic Mexicans in Texas have been invited to participate. The practice of organizing for the common interest of an ethnic group likewise was neither separatist nor new; in fact, it was a cherished American tradition, just as mainstream as professional associations and chambers of commerce. “PASO is an independent, non-partisan group...” Peña concluded, that “will endorse candidates on the basis of their qualifications and platforms, regardless of party label, regardless of race, color or creed.”

On November 26, 1960, less than three weeks after the election, members of the “Viva Kennedy-Johnson Clubs” from across the state came together in San Antonio to discuss their plans for the future. Albert Peña chaired the meeting, opening with his

93 Albert Peña, “County Comment,” SNAP News, August 18, 1961, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3. Peña also read his column on a Westside radio program and on KCOR, a black-owned station later acquired by a member of the Sutton family. Paul Thompson of the San Antonio Express was the main critic of Peña and PASO to whom the column generally responded.
assessment of their new status. “We have achieved one great goal...‘RECOGNITION,’” he announced, and ethnic Mexicans could now reasonably expect patronage appointments in the new administration. Henry B. Gonzalez offered a similar assessment and urged those in attendance to begin collecting poll taxes for 1961. Educator George I. Sanchez addressed the gathering and succinctly laid out its mission: “We have long been represented by people that truly know very little of our [Mexican-American] people,” he said. “We want to be represented by one our many qualified people.” The group formed three committees: one to craft a “Statement of Particulars” (chaired by Sanchez) one to focus on selling poll taxes under the label “Citizenship Participation,” and a third to build the “Organization.” The meeting drafted a telegram to send to the president-elect and designated a delegation to attend the inauguration in Washington in January.  

As the members paused to celebrate Kennedy’s taking office, George Sanchez got to work on drafting the new organization’s mission. The product of his labors, “The American of Mexican Descent: A Statement of Principle,” became the defining credo of ethnic Mexican political activists in the 1960s. While “recognition” and upward mobility remained significant, most of the agenda centered on labor issues and uplifting the poor. The statement, signed only by the “Viva Kennedy Texas Organization,” noted that Mexican-Americans were “the forgotten people,” barely noticed by policy-makers and “almost completely and systematically excluded” from public service in Austin and Washington. For several pages, Sanchez laid out the oppressed status of his ethnic group.

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94 “Viva Kennedy-Johnson Clubs Meeting,” Gunter Hotel, November 6, 1960, with handwritten committee lists, Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 2. Bob Sanchez, the Latin American Affairs consultant to the Texas State AFL-CIO, was also appointed to the Statement of Particulars Committee.
Most lived in poverty, few had access to education, and even fewer made their way into quality jobs. Most suffered from low wages and precarious employment. Many migrated seasonally in search of work, but even then they were often undercut by “commuters,” “wetbacks,” and “braceros.” Yet no Myrdal Report, government commissions, or even works of fiction brought their plight into public debate—they were simply forgotten. “In comparison to a recital of the woes of the Mexican-American,” Sanchez wrote, “Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* is cheerful.”

The statement concluded with several pages listing nine principles “for a brighter tomorrow.” Mexican Americans should be utilized to fix the wide range of problems, Sanchez pleaded—use the few of us who have gotten ahead in order to help rest. The federal government should improve education and guarantee basic health and welfare needs. It must better regulate the border with Mexico and help migrant agricultural laborers by institution a minimum wage, special education programs, and an expanded U.S. Employment Service. Not only justice but foreign policy demanded that the government discover the Mexican American. “Human decency at home and international good politics go hand in hand,” Sanchez concluded.

Finally, Sanchez turned his focus inward, expanding on his statement in San Antonio that ethnic Mexicans needed better, more accountable leadership. The “Mexican-American of the Southwest” have had leaders who have not been his spokesman, he wrote, who were poorly-qualified to make far-reaching judgments on his needs. These included “non-Latin officials whom he helped to elect and some of his own people who are, at best, only incidentally concerned over the crises faced by his fellows.”
The purpose of the Viva Kennedy movement and its successor organization is to foster new leaders. “We believe very strongly that to understand this population group—its needs, its hopes and aspirations, and its very sense of self—one needs to go to the ‘grass roots,’” a group that included not just “the common men” but also and “business and professional men who identify with the common man.” Current local and state officials have failed to do this, including Mexican Americans who have improved their own status while neglecting their people. Well-intentioned liberals of all races have also failed the Mexican-American, mostly because they have made decisions that affect ethnic Mexicans without going to the grass-roots for advice. The solution, the statement of principles concluded, was self-determination: “It is our purpose here…to underline the fact that only the mexicanos can speak for the mexicanos—and that it would be well to assess very carefully the claims of any individual, mexicano or otherwise, who would speak for us.”

The objectives were thus the eradication of poverty and discrimination and the fostering of economic opportunity; autonomous organizing for independent political representation was the means.

In early February, 1961, the group of Viva Kennedy leaders from around Texas assembled again in Victoria, on the Gulf southwest of Houston, where they formally founded their new organization. The Statement of Principles circulated at the meeting, but most of the discussion centered on the nitty-gritty work of organizing. Peña again

chaired the gathering, which he said he hoped would result in the “historic” formation of a “strictly political organization among Mexican-American people.” It was born out of a “practical political necessity...because the only thing politicians respect is votes.” By organizing, Peña added, ethnic Mexicans could “make their voice heard and their vote counted.” Henry B. Gonzalez pointed out that “with the possible exception of the GI Forum, other organization[s] of Mexican-Americans do nothing to encourage political participation.” It was now time to expand on the LULACs and older civil rights organizations and focus on the quest for independent representation and political power.

The activists debated and passed a Constitution and By-laws, christening their group the Mexican-American Political Association (MAPA). Hector Garcia of the American G.I. Forum declined to serve as the state leader because he wanted to focus on organizing MAPA at the national level. Peña was then nominated and elected by acclamation. Bob Sanchez, the Latin American Affairs advisor to the Texas State AFL-CIO, was elected regional vice-chairman for South Texas. Ed Idar, Jr., Sanchez’s law partner and a longtime G.I. Forum staffer, became the group’s acting secretary. Both Idar and UAW activist Franklin Garcia of Dallas declined nominations to serve as the state body’s first vice-chairman.96

Several labor activists joined Bob Sanchez and Franklin Garcia in launching MAPA, and labor issues were never far removed from the activists’ discussion of electoral organizing. In fact, the meeting of the new, ostensibly “strictly political”

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96 Minutes of “Viva Kennedy-Johnson Clubs Meeting at County Courthouse, Victoria, Texas,” February 5, 1961, 1-3, 11-12 (quotations on 2-3), Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 2. Roy Elizondo of Houston’s “Civic Action Committee” was named regional vice-chairman for East Texas. Peña’s assistant Albert Fuentes of San Antonio became vice-chairman for West Texas.
organization concluded with a presentation by Garcia and Idar on the “commuter problem along the Mexican border.” Idar presented a resolution on the issue that had recently been approved by the Laredo branch of the G.I. Forum. It was moved and unanimously approved that MAPA prepare a similar resolution and send it out to all interested parties.97

A new political force was thus founded in Texas, bringing together diverse civil rights, labor, and political activists under the fiery leadership of Albert Peña. In early May it changed its name to the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASO), following the lead of a national meeting of Viva Kennedy members organized by G.I. Forum president Hector Garcia and Kennedy staffer Carlos McCormick.98 By any name, the organization’s creation represented a declaration of independence by ethnic Mexican political activists in Texas. Yet it remained unclear how that independent voice would make itself heard.

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The incipient organization faced its first test even before its founding was complete. In early December 1960, Henry B. Gonzalez, who had just been re-elected to the state senate, announced his candidacy for LBJ’s vacated U.S. Senate seat, joining “moderate” U.S. Congressman Jim Wright of Fort Worth and interim Senator William Blakley, “a Dallas conservative,” who had also held the post briefly in 1957. Within a few weeks, just before the New Year, Maury Maverick, Jr., also threw his hat in the ring.

97 Ibid., 12. Other labor activists included Paul Montemayor of Corpus Christi and Al Rodriguez of Houston. See “Texas State MAPA Mailing Labels,” 4, 8, Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 2.
98 Letter from Carlos McCormick to Ed Idar, Jr., March 16, 1961; Letter from Albert A. Peña to “Fellow Member,” May 1, 1961—both in Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 2.
adding a second bonafide liberal to the increasingly crowded field. The two San Antonio legislators and frequent allies each called on the other to withdraw from the race, but neither did so. Gonzalez maintained that he had announced his candidacy first, and that he was the real “unreconstructed fighting American liberal of the old school.” Twenty-two candidates announced, while John Tower, a Wichita Falls Republican, who had run against Johnson and received 40% of the vote for the seat in November, waited in the wings.  

The special election primary split asunder the tentative coalition that had been formed at the Democratic state convention the previous summer. Texas MAPA, SNAP News, and most ethnic Mexican and African American organizations across the state endorsed Gonzalez. Labor’s Committee on Political Education (COPE) endorsed Maverick at a meeting that Gonzalez called “rigged.” White “independent” liberals mostly supported Maverick, who had long been associated with the ADA. The results were predictable.  

Still, Gonzalez barnstormed the state to solidify his support in hopes of reaching a run-off. (The legislature changed the state special election law after Ralph Yarborough’s first election in 1957, and it now required a run-off in the event that a single candidate did not achieve a majority in the first round.) Logging 45,000 miles in his station wagon in

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99 “Gonzalez Enters Battle for Senate,” Texas Observer, December 9, 1960, 3 (first and second quotations); “Maverick Announces,” Texas Observer, December 30, 1960, 8; “Gonzalez in Race to Stay,” Texas Observer, January 28, 1961, 1. Gonzalez announced on December 3; Maverick on December 22. Johnson ran for both the U.S. Senate and the Vice-Presidency on the same ballot.  
the month of March, and spending less than $15,000—a tenth of his most well-financed
opponent—Gonzalez held countless meetings before ethnic Mexican and African
American social and political clubs. One report noted, “On civil rights Gonzalez is a
pragmatist, practicing regularly, preaching seldom.” While the State Senator claimed that
he “made no special appeal to Negroes” and that they didn’t “owe [him] anything
special,” he remained a favorite of black activists for his 1957 filibuster against
segregationist legislation and his ongoing “practicing” of integration. In Beaumont, the
report noted, “he cancelled a hotel banquet hall reservation because the hotel would not
give him assurance that if Negro supporters showed up they would be admitted.” He
likewise appeared alongside African American candidates at each tour stop, including
Rev. David Williams in San Angelo, a candidate for the local school board, and G.J.
Sutton, who was running for the San Antonio City Council. Gonzalez was “impatient
with the delay in leveling out the racial upheaval[s]” in Texas, and he was likewise antsy
about his position in state politics. He had run for governor in 1958 and believed that he
could win a statewide race in 1961. Now was the time for change. 101

Meanwhile, Maverick’s campaign drew upon the vast resources of labor and the
old DOT’s “independent” liberals to send countless workers into the field. At times, their
efforts extended to African American working people. In March 1961, for example, Mrs.
Erma D. LeRoy of Houston traveled as a “Special Representative” of the AFL-CIO to
campaign for Maverick among African Americans in Fort Worth, Waco, the Upper Gulf
Coast, and smaller black communities throughout Deep East Texas. She visited sixteen

different areas in three weeks, reporting to labor headquarters on March 18. In most cases “enthusiasm” about the upcoming Senate election “had not reached the peak, before my arrival,” she wrote. At many stops, “it was apparent that people were waiting for someone whom they had confidence in to steer them in the right direction.” LeRoy had traveled some of these routes in the 1960 poll tax and presidential campaigns, and in some of those locales “the people were quite vocal about wanting to hear from me before making a decision, or a commitment.” In the medium-sized towns of Deep East Texas, “key leaders...had been approached in interest of various candidates [but] had refused to accept...until my arrival.” LeRoy believed that she was “instrumental to getting them to decide on Maverick” in all sixteen areas she visited, adding that many local activists busily began campaigning before she left for the next visit. She credited her success to her approach, namely, her argument that a vote for Maverick was a vote for Kennedy’s agenda in Washington. She stressed the “absolute necessity” of electing a Senator “who will vote for $1.25 minimum hourly wage....aid to depressed areas, [and] strong civil rights legislation.” Meeting with “individuals, labor groups, ministerial unions, heads of federated clubs, civic groups,” and “key workers” at several large employers in the region, including members of the Hod Carriers and Oil Workers unions, LeRoy added that “a failure to vote for Maverick, who is our most electable liberal, is a vote for a conservative, who will vote against everything Kennedy is advocating.” After such arguments, “they usually see the light,” she added. Her whirlwind tour of the region was
“very rewarding,” LeRoy concluded, since it helped labor make “new friends for us” and “reactivated those of previous standing.”

LeRoy also noted that the Maverick campaign was struggling with deep divisions among African Americans in most of the state’s urban centers. The Harris County Council of Organizations, of which her husband Moses was an officer, made no endorsement after its members split their votes between Attorney General Will Wilson, a well-financed Johnson-style “moderate,” and Gonzalez. The lack of a two-thirds majority by either candidate “killed endorsement,” LeRoy reported. “Therefore the individual organizations [within HCCO] are left free to endorse anyone they choose.”

In a subsequent report, she added that the “wide division among voters in Houston and Dallas” was so great that “we decided it would be a waste of money to attempt to get out the vote there, for fear we would most likely get out the opposition’s vote.” She instead focused her efforts in Beaumont, Port Arthur, and smaller towns in East Texas.

Although Erma LeRoy and most of labor’s grass-roots activists dutifully campaigned for Maverick, including in black neighborhoods across the state, Texas AFL-CIO President Hank Brown understood that labor’s support for the white liberal would set back efforts to build a multiracial coalition. He wrote to Latin-American Affairs consultant R.P. Bob Sanchez just days after the COPE endorsement meeting. “Labor's

102 Handwritten memorandum from Erma D. LeRoy to Fred Schmidt, March 18, 1961, in Texas AFL-CIO Records, Executive Board Office Records [hereinafter Texas AFL-CIO Executive Board Records], AR110, Series 1 [AR110-1], Box 12, Folder 1, UTA-TLA. On her work during the 1960 campaigns, see LeRoy’s reports to Jerry Holleman dated January 6, May 9, and November 12, in the same location. Moses LeRoy accompanied her on at least one of her tours (January 6).
103 Ibid, 5; “Negro Group to Back No Senate Candidate,” Houston Chronicle, March 20, 1961, HCM-HMRC, HCCO.
104 Handwritten memorandum from Erma D. LeRoy to Fred Schmidt, April 10, 1961, Texas AFL-CIO Executive Board Records, UTA-TLA, AR110-1-12-1.
action in support of Maury Maverick, Jr. for the U.S. Senate has of course caused us great consternation,” he wrote. “We realize that we have in some places and in some regard caused us a setback in our relationship with the Latin American and the Negro groups in Texas. Henry [Gonzalez] is a great man who has performed noble service in behalf of liberalism and humanity. There are many considerations in such a situation...” Sanchez replied that he understood that Maverick had long been close to labor and might be more electable than Gonzalez in a run-off. He added that he had a “rather heated argument with Henry himself on this very question.” But for ethnic Mexicans activists no nuance was needed. Sanchez wrote: “…Latin leaders like myself, with Henry in the race, have nowhere else to go but with Henry unless we want to commit political suicide and be ineffective in politics for years to come.” The question was what “Latins” would do in the run-off, he added. At that point, “As regards the Latin vote, your task and mine is to see that the old coalition in this State of labor, Negroes, and Latins is once again together so that we may swing it.” Brown agreed, adding that they should get a diverse group together soon after the April 4 election to “discuss the feasibility of a joint cooperative effort in the run-off...”105

In the end neither Gonzalez nor Maverick advanced to the run-off. Brown likely hoped that Maverick would make it to the next round, or at least that a moderate such as Wilson or Congressman Wright might continue forward. Instead William Blakley, the

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interim Senator and the most conservative Democratic in the race, advanced to square off against Republican darling John Tower.

Black, brown, and white liberals were all forced to regroup. Mrs. Frankie Carter Randolph of the DOT advised her friends and fellow activists to simply “go fishing” on the day of election in early June. Upset about the Gonzalez defeat and the slow pace of patronage coming from Washington, PASO refused to endorse Blakley. “In order to prove our worth and our ‘guts,’” national organizer Hector P. Garcia wrote after the election, “the Texas ‘PASO’ organization decided that they would not help ‘Democratic’ Senator William Blakely. We had to prove to the Democratic machinery that they could not win without our work and help.” San Antonio black activists surrounding SNAP News likewise blasted Blakley as a continuation of the Shivers-Daniel segregationist wing of the party, noting that he had led the questioning of the credentials of Federal Housing Authority administrator Robert Weaver, a high-level African American appointed by Kennedy. The paper urged readers to vote for a “thinking man’s candidate...John Tower.” In Houston, the HCCO endorsed Blakley, but it did so only after President Kennedy reluctantly did the same.106

Tower carried the state by 10,000 votes, becoming the first Republican Senator in Texas history and the first from his party in the South since Reconstruction. Liberal and

moderate Democrats had indeed stayed home as Blakley gained only half of the roughly 491,000 combined votes cast for Wright, Wilson, Maverick, and Gonzalez in the first round. Black voters abandoned the election en masse: in 18 Dallas heavily-black precincts with over 19,000 poll tax holders, less than 3,000 voted in the run-off. According to Hector Garcia, ethnic Mexicans followed PASO’s lead and withheld their support from Blakley, giving the organizing new “recognition and prestige.”

Yet withholding an endorsement with the result being the election of an arch-conservative Republican was hardly a victory for many ethnic Mexicans, including the liberal leader Albert Peña. San Antonio’s Eastside activists could rejoice in vanquishing one bigoted Democrat, but doing so bolstered the strength of their longtime opponents in the GGL. And the election was nothing less than disastrous for the Texas State AFL-CIO, which watched as two legislators with consistent pro-labor voting records cut into each other’s vote totals in the first round and then sat out the run-off. Independent liberals returned from their fishing trips and hoped to re-group, again.

As promised, Hank Brown summoned members of each group to Austin on July 7, 1961. Meeting in the ballroom of the Stephen F. Austin Hotel downtown, the diverse group of “some 75 people from over the State of Texas” discussed the recent “political development that brought us to our present position...” Many of the attendees came from labor or the old DOT clubs, though Albert Peña, Erma LeRoy, and other black and brown activists joined them. Dallas labor lawyer Otto Mullinax was elected to serve as

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temporary chair, and Peña and Maury Maverick, Jr., opened the meeting with remarks of “good will...concerning the recent senatorial campaign.”

The bulk of the discussion centered on the future, with various ideas being floated for how to avoid a repeat performance and better bring the various groups together for future campaigns. Don Ellinger of the AFL-CIO’s COPE department suggested a formal coalition, which “would consist of people who would meet together because they were recognized by the other people as possessing judgement [sic] and political influence within different segments of the political community called Texas, meeting for the limited objective of trying to reach substantially unanimous agreement on limited political targets.” Another activist proposed a “Forum” that would allow for discussion among diverse liberals but would not participate in lobbying or political action. Finally, a leader of the DOT hoped that the organization could continue its historic role as a pressure group within the Democratic Party. All three ideas were welcomed by the attendees, who believed that all three concepts could continue “without warring” and that each could serve as a “rallying point around which all liberals could coalesce.” The group resolved to meet again as the “coalition” in September “with the objective of securing candidates and assuring their election to congressional and state government offices, and to prepare for a poll tax drive.” They named a steering committee to prepare an agenda and direct the coalition. It included Peña, Maverick, Ellinger, Hank Brown, Fred Schmidt, Frankie Randolph, Erma LeRoy, and eight others.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ “Summary of Coalition Action,” July 7, 1961, copies in Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 2, and Texas AFL-CIO COPE Records, AR110-8-4-12.
Back in Bexar County, the local coalition’s mending process continued. In July, Henry B. Gonzalez also announced his candidacy for the vacated Congressional seat of Paul Kilday, who had been appointed to a post in the Kennedy administration. Kilday had held the seat since 1938, when he defeated Maury Maverick, Sr., following the pecan sheller uprising. Maury Jr. had long hoped to return to his father’s post, but Henry B. trounced him in the district in the special Senate election. Maverick defeated Gonzalez in the statewide returns, but in Bexar County the ethnic Mexican senator outpolled him 26,000 to 9,000 votes. Gonzalez “proved once and for all that he was still king of Bexar County liberal politicos,” the Texas Observer reported, and Maury quickly endorsed his former opponent and friend. In August, Maverick held a dinner in honor of Albert Peña, but its real purpose was to continue the “healing of wounds between myself and Gonzalez, etc., plus other political factors,” he wrote.109

The statewide “Democratic Coalition,” as it now called itself, proceeded with its business. Albert Peña chaired the meeting of the steering committee on August 26. Roughly half of the committee members were African Americans or ethnic Mexicans, a multiracial group gathering in a downtown hotel where they would not have been welcome just a few years earlier. Moses LeRoy joined Erma in attendance; Peña’s assistant Albert Fuentes joined the commissioner, and Henry B. was represented by his longtime aid, Lalo Solis. Dr. Marion J. Brooks of Fort Worth represented the Progressive Voters’ League, a statewide African American counterpart to PASO that had grown out of the semi-defunct NAACP (the LeRoys were also frequent officers of the League).

Hank Brown and Lyman Jones represented the Texas AFL-CIO, and a handful of white “independent” liberals rounded out the committee. The committee discussed the three special elections to fill four legislative and three Congressional seats, including Gonzalez’s race, and they looked ahead to the statewide and U.S. and state house elections of 1962. Senator Ralph Yarborough addressed the meeting to discuss Kennedy’s legislative program, but “the committee expressed anxiety over the Federal appointments.” With the exception of Holleman, no coalition members had found their way to a patronage position in Washington. Delegates blamed Johnson for stonewalling progress, but they also expected Yarborough to advocate on their behalf. The meeting concluded with a resolution to send a “representative group” of coalition members to personally present the issue to President Kennedy.110

The Democratic Coalition held its second meeting on September 9 and a third “and perhaps most important” gathering took place on October 14. The minutes of these gatherings have not survived in the historical record, but a few clues remain. The first gathering heard reports on the upcoming Congressional and state legislative races and passed a proposal by Don Ellinger for a broad-based, statewide poll tax drive for 1962—a “full-scale, as never before” seen “sweeping” effort to recruit “unprecedented numbers” of liberal Democrats. The coalition planned to hire a multiracial group of coordinators for the ambitious campaign, including at least one “Negro” and at least one “Latin-American.” The campaign also sought to reach the wives of male union members, “who

110 Letter from H.S. (Hank Brown) to “Democrat,” September 1, 1961, and enclosed Minutes of Agenda Committee Meeting, Democratic Coalition, August 26, 1961, copies in Texas AFL-CIO COPE Records, AR110-8-4-12 and Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 2.
often do not vote.” It also appointed a committee on political candidates, to be chaired by plaintiff’s attorney Chris Dixie of Houston and composed of “a rough cross-section of the coalition,” including Albert Peña, Moses LeRoy, Hank Brown, and five others. The committee would research all possible candidates for each office. Finally, the group continued to debate its operating guidelines. Dixie announced that “Nobody, and no organization, is committed to anything by attendance at a Coalition meeting—except our common general desire to work for the good of the Democratic Party in Texas. In other words, we are trying to reach a concensus [sic] – trying to come up with plans and programs at which we can all work together.” Or as the Observer put it, the coalition aspired to a “modus vivendi... between a tightly-organized DOT-type organization and complete, though cordial, anarchy.” Yarborough and Gonzalez also addressed the meeting.\textsuperscript{111}

The fissures of the Senate campaign had thus given way to a new, statewide, multiracial coalition. It was not entirely novel: efforts to build similar bodies went back as far as the CIO-led Texas Social & Legislative Conference of the early 1950s. Yet those earlier attempts were largely unidirectional entreaties by organized labor to seek allies in their own fight for the general welfare of working people. The rise of the black civil rights movement, the increasing electoral prowess of African American activists in Houston and San Antonio, the creation of the Progressive Voters’ League statewide, the

rise of the Bexar County Democratic Coalition, the increased participation of African Americans and ethnic Mexicans in organized labor, and above all the growth of Viva Kennedy and PASO had all transformed the political landscape. Black and brown civil rights and labor activists carried a new degree of clout and independence into the electoral arena, and they had won a degree of the “recognition” they had long sought. It was becoming clear to all that no Democrat could win without their support, and organized labor and white liberals had acknowledged that they needed to make room at their table. The multiracial composition of this newest coalition’s steering committee was one clear reflection of the changed political reality, a measurement of the change that had taken place since the early 1950s. The door had indeed opened.

* * *

All did not go according to plan in the fall of 1961 and the spring of 1962. Gonzalez won his Congressional race, but PASO soon came apart at the seams, officially endorsing incumbent Governor Price Daniel for re-election while many of the former Viva Kennedy activists campaigned for liberal Don Yarborough (no relation to the Senator), the state’s first outspoken integrationist gubernatorial candidate. Many African Americans, meanwhile, supported the bid of former U.S. Navy Secretary and Johnson confidant John Connally, who championed his ties to the Kennedy administration and alluded to supporting civil rights in front of black audiences while simultaneously denouncing the President in the company of whites. Labor went all out for Yarborough.
The Democratic Coalition thus failed to prevent the split of its constituent parts, and by the time they re-organized for the run-off, it was too late. Still, in the wake of the 1962 general election, the liberals again found reasons to hope.

PASO held its largest meeting yet in Laredo in September, 1961. It was a generally genial gathering, one in which steelworker Paul Montemayor twice interrupted the proceedings to demand that the beer he brought be drunk before it got warm. J. O. “Pepper” Garcia of Dallas reported that he and other working-class activists, including his brother Franklin and Pancho Medrano, had organized a new chapter of PASO in the city after the old leadership of the Viva Kennedy clubs refused to get active. A lone member of the original group protested that the labor activists had splintered away, and state chairman Peña agreed to meet with both of them immediately after the gathering and then visit the city to try to bring the two factions together into a single body. Bob Sanchez and Packinghouse Workers leader Mary Salinas of Fort Worth were among the other labor activists present.

Before they got to Montemayor’s beer, PASO members debated the organization’s position on participating in the Democratic Coalition. The debate revealed a diverse group of participants whose political agendas both overlapped and diverged. Albert Peña, Pepper Garcia, Bob Sanchez, and other labor and liberal activists generally supported the idea of participating fully in the coalition, especially after Peña explained that doing so did not commit PASO or individuals to endorsing particular candidates, voting for specific candidates, or taking stands on any particular issues. “He explained that it operates somewhat on the same lines as a coalition...in Bexar County...
people and organizations are invited to participate...but that everybody understands
clearly that there is no commitment involved if a person goes to a particular meeting.”
Peña added that “everybody realizes that in matters of this sort the majority doesn’t
necessarily decide an issue” and that all it requires is “that everyone get together and
discuss an idea or an issue or a candidate...to see if agreement can be reached.” Pepper
Garcia eagerly asked if PASO chapters should join local coalitions, but a member of the
city’s old Viva Kennedy club suggested caution. County Judge Roberto Benavidez of
Laredo, an extremely conservative local politician, added that he “failed to see what the
object was of trying to get PASO groups to participate in coalitions,” when its main and
original purpose was “to stimulate Latin American political participation.” Attorney Ed
Idar of McAllen, a veteran activist, said that “we should strive to think PASO, to talk
PASO, and act PASO and only PASO and leave out all references to other groups.” He
maintained that the group must remain “completely non-partisan” and that the DOT and
other Democratic groups have often “refused to pay any attention to the problems of the
Latin American population.” He said it “would not hurt” if PASO chapters had “an
observer or two” at local and state coalitions, but they must “simply” observe and remind
all involved that “PASO would act independently on its own.” Peña agreed that coalition
groups had at times sold Latin-Americans “down the river,” but he added that he had
“enough experience” to participate and “yet not be sold a bill of goods.”

Montemayor “took the floor to indicate...that he had been trying to drink this beer
but it was too much for him; and that he would appreciate some help in drinking the beer
on the part of the participants...” The gathering agreed to proceed on the Coalition’s poll
tax program, but many if not most of the participants remained deeply skeptical of the idea. Similar cleavages would emerge repeatedly in the coming years.\footnote{Minutes of PASO Meeting Held at Hamilton Hotel, Laredo, Texas, September 24, 1961, and list of participants, Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 2.}

In the November 1961, the Bexar County Democratic Coalition enjoyed a path-breaking victory. Henry B. Gonzalez, campaigning with the Coalition’s full backing, became the state’s first ethnic Mexican Congressman, winning by a substantial margin in an off-year election characterized by record turnout. Albert Peña reportedly convinced Lyndon Johnson to support Henry B.’s bid, and the Vice-President personally came to the city to campaign for Gonzalez. Peña also chaired the Poll Tax committee of LULAC Council #2, which also joined the coalition in turning out voters. Labor organizer Franklin Garcia, originally from the UAW in Dallas, took leave from his new job with the Amalgamated Meat Cutters to campaign for Gonzalez, while Latane Lambert worked all hours of the night coordinating the coalition headquarters. George Lambert and the embattled ILGWU also organized ethnic Mexicans and union members to get out the vote. On the Eastside, G.J. Sutton and other coalition members again went all out for the state Senator, and SNAP ran numerous ads and editorials in support of Henry B. The results were astonishing: Gonzalez carried 55\% of the votes cast, defeating his Republican challenger by more than 10,000 ballots. Some 95\% of the Westside registered voters turned out on election day, with 93\% casting their vote for Gonzalez. One box went 688-7 in his favor. Henry B. also carried the black Eastside by an 11-to-1 margin and carried 70\% of the predominately “middle-income Anglo” Southside. A white Coalition candidate for state representative appeared on the same ballot and rode
his coattails to similar results, despite the GOP’s strategy of fielding “Ish” Garza, a
conservative ethnic Mexican against him. Garza pulled only 15% more of the Westside
vote, showing that politics, ideology, and class all trumped ethnic allegiances alone.\textsuperscript{113}

The statewide Democratic Coalition poll tax drive got underway in December, as
all parties began turning their attention to the gubernatorial primaries 1962. Although
PASO remained lukewarm to the coalition idea as a whole, it readily embraced the poll
tax drive and requested that the Coalition hire one of its members as the “Latin-
American” coordinator of the joint campaign. Gilbert García of Fort Worth, a PASO
founder and officer, got the nod, and began “traveling throughout the State helping
people in local communities set up their individual poll tax drives…” At a meeting of
PASO leaders in Laredo on December 27, García reported that he had logged over 10,000
miles in two weeks of criss-crossing West Texas. He met with groups ranging from four
to 100 individuals, many of which were still dealing with basic problems of school
segregation and discrimination in public accommodations. He said that his goal was “to
organize where organization is needed” and that future campaigns in that part of the state
could potentially register 100,000 new voters. State PASO chairman Albert Peña advised
members to focus on organizing “in our local areas.” He added that chapters “should not,

\textsuperscript{113} All statistics and quotation in “Probing Bexar’s Election Returns,” \textit{Texas Observer}, November 10, 1961,
Papers, MS 37 [hereinafter Peña Papers], University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections,
Institute of Texan Cultures Archives [hereinafter UTSA-ITC], Box 25, Folder 9; “Miscellany,” \textit{San
Antonio Express}, October 10, 1971, copy in Peña Papers, Box 14, Folder 3. On the Eastside, see for
example, \textit{SNAP News}, October 27, 1961, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3. On Franklin Garcia, see the Richard A.
Twedell Papers, AR264-8-7, and the Samuel A. Twedell Papers, AR124, Box 9—both in UTA-TLA. On
the Lamberts, see Letter from Gonzalez to Mr. and Mrs. George Lambert, November 9, 1960; Letter from
Gonzalez to Latane Lambert, December 14, 1961; and Letter from George Lambert to Gonzalez, January 8,
1962—all in Lambert Papers, AR127-11-4, UTA-TLA.
under any circumstances, commit ourselves in state-wide political races.” The Tower victory and the growing viability of the Republican Party in Texas meant that the Democrats must accept them in their “community” in order to win PASO’s support, he concluded. The gathering concluded with the appointment of a committee to screen candidates for office and plan the organization’s first statewide membership and endorsement convention, to be held in San Antonio in February, 1962.114

The convention was an unmitigated disaster. Even before the opening gavel, PASO activists disagreed sharply in regards to the organization’s position in gubernatorial race. In late January, George Sanchez, who had written the “Statement of Principles” that guided PASO, and PASO secretary and veteran G.I. Forum leader Ed Idar exchanged a series of passionate, at times acrimonious letters on the upcoming endorsement. Ironically, it began when Idar asked Sanchez for hundreds of copies of his recent article in the Chicago Jewish Forum, a piece that re-stated and expanded upon the original “American of Mexican Descent” treatise. Sanchez arranged for the re-prints to be sent and added a comment that he preferred one of two liberal candidates for governor. Idar replied that “we can not get anything done by continuing to support ‘protest’ candidates just because they speak a good line.” He noted that Ralph Yarborough had failed to deliver for ethnic Mexicans, voting “right” on eleven of twelve labor issues, just not “the one that was closest to our heart”—the continuation of the bracero program.

114 Letter from Ed Idar, Jr., to Officers and Representatives of PASO organizations in South Texas, December 20, 1961 (first quotation); Minutes of PASO Meeting, Hamilton Hotel, Laredo, December 27, 1961, Ed Idar Papers, Box 9, Folder 2 (all other quotations); Letter from Ed Idar, Jr., to Albert Peña, with enclosure, December 28, 1961—all in Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 2. Labor activists Franklin and Pepper Garcia and Bob Sanchez were among the members of the steering committee.
Idar suggested that all candidates should be considered, including the incumbent, Gov. Price Daniel. Idar argued that PASO should endorse candidates who were “ready and willing to deliver” on “satisfactory commitments” of patronage and formal inclusion.

Sanchez responded that he recently had a long visit with liberal Don Yarborough at his house, that they had spent several hours together and “covered the waterfront.” He left convinced that Yarborough was the best candidate, that he was an “out-and-out integrationist” who was “practical” and “genuinely identified with social problems...”

Sanchez agreed that liberals had not always delivered, but he maintained that Lyndon Johnson had consistently “cut our throats.” Johnson’s preferred candidate, John Connally would do the same, as would Gov. Daniel. “Are we going to be mad at a minor demon and hug to our bosom Satan himself?” Sanchez asked. He later added:

Our only assurance of survival as an organization that has influence is to stand for principle, hold together, and vote our principles on a win-lose-or-draw basis. The minute we start playing the game of expediency and of “button, button, who’s got the button?” we are through. We just cannot afford to play those kinds of games.

Both activists understood that PASO was at a crossroads and that the endorsement threatened to tear it apart. Both hoped that unity could be maintained after the convention, and both agreed that PASO had to decide what was best for ethnic Mexicans rather than be dictated to by white liberals or anyone else. Writing in the Observer,

Ronnie Dugger argued that the greatest threat to the liberal cause was that PASO or other

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115 The exchange fills most of the Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 4. See especially: Letter from Ed Idar, Jr., to George Sanchez, January 23, 1962 (all Idar quotations); Letter from Sanchez to Idar, January 29, 1962 (all Sanchez quotations); and Letter from Sanchez to Idar, February 2, 1962 (on Price Daniel). It is notable that Idar agreed with Sanchez on the question of black civil rights. Idar noted that he could not support Republican Jack Cox because of his segregationist history. Neither faction in this dispute was appealing to whiteness or defining their own struggle in opposition to African Americans.

116 Letter from George Sanchez to Ed Idar, Jr., February 2, 1962, Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 4.
single groups in the coalition would abandon it for “a mess of pottage.” Idar angrily replied to Dugger’s statement, pointing out the many ways that liberalism had failed ethnic Mexicans. He reiterated PASO’s function to provide a united voice for ethnic Mexicans, reminding Dugger of Sanchez’s statement that only *Mexicanos* should speak for *Mexicanos*. Idar noted that he was aware “of the steps the new Democratic Coalition is taking to reunify the liberal movement—and that I am sympathetic to it. But it is going to take time to re-establish the confidence that has been lost.” Sanchez congratulated Idar for the fine letter and said he hoped that the *Observer* should print it.  

Yet their philosophical differences toward the gubernatorial endorsement continued, mirroring the organization’s internal differences writ large. Idar demanded spoils and recognition and was concerned with winning. Sanchez wanted the candidate whose views most closely resembled the “Statement of Principles” and did not believe that significant gains could be made by supporting a more viable, less ideologically committed candidate.

The convention predictably unfolded just as Idar’s and Sanchez’s letters had anticipated. Albert Peña noted that the gathering was “historic” for “Mexican-Americans in Texas” since it was the first time that their collective “vote [was] no longer ‘for sale’ to the highest bidder.” Thanks to PASO, “leaders who act in private to ‘feather their own nests’ will not be tolerated by the people they are supposed to represent,” he added. The gathering would be “an experiment in democracy” that “could change the complexion of

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politics in Texas.” The candidate screening committee spent the entire opening Friday of the convention interviewing candidates, and all day on Saturday the candidates made speeches before the entire convention. Gov. Price Daniel emerged as the favored candidate after promising several patronage appointments, inclusion in his campaign, and one hundred jobs on the state highway patrol to ethnic Mexicans. On Sunday morning, Peña called the convention to order, urging unity and reminding the delegates that they all must pledge to support the nominees of the majority. He offered them an opportunity to leave at that moment if they were not in agreement with the pledge. Paul Montemayor left, noting that he was bound to follow the endorsement of labor’s COPE convention. Sanchez rose to speak on organization’s founding principles, concluding that they stood in contradiction with an endorsement of Price Daniel. After much discussion, and over many objection, Hank Brown was allowed to address the convention. “He stated that organized labor had made no decision concerning any race and that the decisions would be made at the labor convention next week.” Peña called for nominees for the gubernatorial race, and delegates proposed only Daniel and Don Yarborough. The organization’s diehard liberals voted for Yarborough, while the conservatives supported the incumbent and his promises of jobs and recognition. Daniel received a majority, and a motion that he be “elected unanimously” then passed. Ignoring the pledge, Sanchez walked out of the convention in protest. The meeting concluded with the election of

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118 Albert Peña, “County Comment,” SNAP News, February 9, 1962, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3; copy also in Peña Papers, UTSA-ITC, Box 22, Folder 8.
officers: Peña was re-elected as chairman, Idar promoted to executive secretary, and labor activist Franklin Garcia became the “State Organizer.”119

Gov. Daniel immediately hired six PASO members to join his campaign staff, quickly demonstrating that he would follow through on his promise of future patronage appointments. Ed Idar went to Austin to work in the campaign’s headquarters.120 Sanchez continued to ignore the convention pledge, campaigning feverishly for the liberal Don Yarborough. Peña “stuck to his guns” and adhered to the majority decision and worked for Daniel, as did the other officers.121

Yet the disagreement between the two PASO leaders split the organization apart at the grassroots. By the end of March it was increasingly clear that a major rift had engulfed the group, as Idar defended himself against charges that he had cut a deal with governor prior to the convention. Idar pleaded with the rank and file, arguing that “a vote for Daniel is a vote for PASO.” But Sanchez and many liberal ethnic Mexicans continued to fight against him. So too did labor activists like Paul Montemayor, who left the convention so he could follow the dictates of COPE, which “recommended” Yarborough the week after the PASO meeting.122

Most black and white labor union members likewise campaigned for the liberal Yarborough. Other African Americans divided their votes between Yarborough and John

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120 Letter from Ed Idar, Jr., to Albert Peña, February 21, 1962, Peña Papers, UTSA-ITC, Box 22, Folder 2 (copy in Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 6).
Connally. In San Antonio, SNAP News ran numerous ads for Connally, including photographs of the former Navy Secretary alongside John Kennedy and slogans that the former would serve as a governor “for all the people.” Another prominently featured Lt. Com. Samuel L. Gravely, the nation’s first African American commander of a warship, noting that he had been appointed by Connally. An occasional article in SNAP mentioned that one or another local organization was supporting Connally, but Rev. Black and G. J. Sutton were conspicuously absent from this coverage. For his part, Coleman focused on the local race for District Attorney, which he helped coordinate.

Still, many leaders of San Antonio’s black community, including Ruth Bellinger, educator Joe Scott, and the entire African Methodist Episcopal alliance, all backed Connally. Rev. H. Rhett James of Dallas, who led the sit-ins there, endorsed Connally, as did black businessman Hobart Taylor of Houston. The HCCO remained split and did not formally endorse a candidate.\(^{123}\)

Election Day, May 5, revealed the depth of PASO’s miscalculation. Price Daniel failed to advance to the Democratic primary run-off, placing a distant third behind Connally, who led the field with 30% of the votes, and Yarborough, who garnered 22%.

Yarborough’s labor and liberal supporters moved quickly to try to shore up their support among African Americans and ethnic Mexicans, but PASO remained sharply divided. George Sanchez and other liberals appealed to the organization’s officers, asking them to endorse Yarborough in the run-off. But conservative Judge Robert Benavidez of Laredo maintained that the organization’s officers did not have the

\(^{123}\) SNAP News, April 20 and 27, and May 4, 1962, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3; “Negro Group Splits On Governor Endorsement,” Houston Chronicle, April 9, 1962, HCM-HMRC, HCCO.
authority to change the convention endorsement. Peña and the other officers decided to follow his lead, not wanting to make the division in the organization’s ranks worse.

“Peña reiterated that PASO must continue as a force in Texas,” read the minutes of the board’s meeting. The officers offered no endorsement and allowed local PASO chapters to make their own decisions as appropriate to their local conditions.\textsuperscript{124}

In Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio, local PASO chapters all endorsed Yarborough for the June run-off, all in conjunction with local multiracial, liberal-labor coalitions. The HCCO endorsed him, as did SNAP News and a suddenly very-visible G.J. Sutton. The Bexar County Democratic Coalition regrouped around Yarborough, but more conservative African Americans in San Antonio and across the state continued to campaign for Connally. White liberals and labor activists continued to feverishly get out the vote for Yarborough.\textsuperscript{125}

In the end, it was too little too late for the state’s nascent Democratic Coalition. No group felt the sting more than PASO, and especially its liberal wing led by Albert Peña. PASO’s deal with Price Daniel failed to win them more than temporary recognition in the campaign, and it did not result in jobs, patronage, or lasting political power, as the group’s leaders had hoped. Yarborough proved that he was electable in the first primary, but he could not win the run-off without a robust coalition behind him. Connally narrowly won the nomination, defeating his liberal foe by just 26,000 votes out

\textsuperscript{124} Minutes of PASO Meeting, San Antonio, May 14, 1962; Letter from James de Anda to PASO Members and Officers, May 22, 1962—both in Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 6.
of more than 1.1 million cast, a 51% to 49% victory. Connally’s appeal to black and brown voters was decisive. The defection of the former group, attributed to Connally’s service as Navy Secretary and his claims of close ties to the Kennedy Administration, had a “telling effect,” especially in San Antonio and Fort Worth. Bexar County went for Connally by a 2-to-1 margin, maintaining much of his support from the first primary, when he dumped unprecedented sums of money into the county and carried two-thirds of the votes in normally heavily liberal Westside precincts. A day-long rain slowed turnout in Harris County and along the Upper Gulf Coast, the home region of Yarborough and the heart of the state’s labor movement. 

Still, Yarborough was astonishingly close to victory. Peña remarked after the election that Connally had “rode two horses at the same time—successfully. He solicited support of the anti-Kennedy people by repudiating [his] program; and he solicited support of people friendly to Kennedy by using the prestige” of his cabinet appointment. Connally enjoyed a number of other advantages, yet he just barely won. Still, the “run-off primary proved that overwhelming newspaper support, unlimited finances, and promiscuous labeling doesn’t insure [sic] victory for a candidate,” he added. Had only 13,000 voters switched their vote, Don Yarborough would have won. It was the closest

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126 “How It Happened” (quotation); “West Side Story—Tactics of an Election,” *Texas Observer*, May 19, 1962, 1; *SNAP News*, June 1, 1962, SABHC. Connally carried the 24 East Side precincts by 1,000 votes in a campaign led by Ruth Bellinger and Joe Scott, while Sutton and Rev. Black campaigned for Yarborough. Coleman’s candidate for DA, “Big” Jim Barlow, carried the same precincts by over 5,000, indicating that a coordinated, year-long effort by the liberal black activists could have produced better results for Yarborough as well.
margin of defeat for liberal gubernatorial candidate since Ralph Yarborough lost to Shivers in 1954.\textsuperscript{127}

As the focus switched to the general election in November, black, brown, and white activists all worked to hold Connally’s feet to the fire. Coleman argued in \textit{SNAP News} that African American voters must now demand that he fulfilled his promise of standing for all the people, including his claim to support the New Frontier goals of federal aid for education, old age medical insurance, and above all “equal job opportunity.”\textsuperscript{128} Peña called on Connally to “take the lead” in abolishing the poll tax “and in setting up a Fair Employment Practices code in State Government.”\textsuperscript{129}

PASO transitioned from licking its wounds to re-organizing into a more steadfastly liberal ethnic Mexican movement. On May 25, national president Hector Garcia wrote an angry letter to George Sanchez, claiming that the latter’s “actions did more to destroy PASO as any other individual” and that Sanchez and other liberals “helped tear it down completely.” He refused Sanchez’s request to “forget everything that happened...” Ed Idar agreed, and on June 27 he resigned his post as PASO Executive Secretary and claimed he was “withdrawing from all political activity” after fifteen years in the struggle.\textsuperscript{130}

Peña continued organizing in preparation for the general election. In late August he called together PASO members from across the state to a new endorsement

\textsuperscript{127} Albert Peña, “County Comment,” \textit{SNAP News}, July 27, 1961, SABHC, MS 139, Box 3.
\textsuperscript{128} “‘What is Connally For?’ Asks Mrs. Voigt,” and reply by Coleman, \textit{SNAP News}, June 9, 1961, SABHC.
\textsuperscript{130} Letter from Hector P. Garcia to George I. Sanchez, May 25, 1962, and Letter from Ed Idar, Jr., to Albert Peña, June 27, 1962—both in Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 2. Also see Idar’s oral history interview in Box 1, Folder 2.
convention in Austin. The group endorsed Connally “with the qualifications that the state Democratic platform would be in keeping with the national Democratic platform.” But at the state party’s convention in El Paso on September 18, Connally flatly refused to consider the group’s recommendations, while also ignoring the pleas of organized labor. Peña found himself one of three delegates that voted in the minority against the state platform, which neither include a strong civil rights plank nor called for the repeal of the poll tax, the right-to-work law, and the bracero program.\textsuperscript{131}

PASO soon reasserted its independence and strength, despite growing criticism of both Peña’s political acumen and the organization’s relevance to ordinary voters. When Peña returned to San Antonio after the state convention, he declared that he would form a committee of PASO members to “study” the Democratic platform and adjust the ethnic the group’s recommendations accordingly. A hostile editorial in the September 21 \textit{San Antonio Evening News} laid into the Commissioner: “May we suggest ...that he should see his eye doctor. Pena’s vision is blurred terribly. He can’t even see a bandwagon.” While everyone else has jumped into Connally’s steamrolling campaign, Pena continues to miss the boat—as he did in the primary, when PASO endorsed Daniel, and in the run-off, when he worked for Yarborough. PASO “obviously doesn’t speak for very many Spanish-speaking people,” the editor added.

The great masses of Spanish-speaking peoples voted for Mr. Connally in the primaries, as the record shows. So, they aren’t as easy to put in halter and lead or mislead as Pena seems to think...[He] was made all the more ridiculous by his pronouncement that he will summon the troops and see

\textsuperscript{131} Willie Morris, “Political Summons in Bexar,” \textit{Texas Observer}, October 5, 1962, 1, 8 (quotation on 8).
about this platform. In what telephone booth will you meet, Mr. Commissioner?132

Peña replied five days later by expanding his committee to a full scale convention. He wrote to PASO members across the state and asked them to come to San Antonio on October 7. The Observer reports that “he set the gathering place at the telephone booth on the corner of Houston Street and Soledad,” with the proceedings to continue at the Gunter Hotel downtown. The state chairman issued a challenge to PASO members: the group is either “a moving, vital force in Texas politics, or it isn’t,” he wrote. It is either “independent thinking...or it isn’t.” It is either “the conscience of the aims and aspirations of the Mexican-American and all well-meaning Texans, or it isn’t.” Peña included a copy of the editorial in his letter. He noted that he was not upset by the “personal vituperation.” Rather, “What does aggravate me is insinuation that PASO is non-existent, that PASO is a figment of my imagination or of a very few.” Such charges were not new, he added, as similar claims had been made about the Viva Kennedy clubs in 1960. But now, “The time has come, that if PASO exists a public display of our representation across the state is vital, if only to prove its existence...We must decide the future role of PASO. Is PASO dead?”133

Five hundred delegates representing twenty-one counties answered Peña’s call and descended on San Antonio, just ten days after he sent his letter. Two hundred of them assembled at the phone booth before making their way to the Gunter Hotel. When Peña entered the ballroom, he was greeted with a standing ovation. Then, after more than

132 Quoted in *ibid*, 1, 8.
three hours of debate, the convention voted to withdraw its earlier endorsement of Connally (it did not endorse a candidate). Gilbert Garcia of Fort Worth, who had organized the group’s poll tax drive earlier that year before joining the Price Daniel campaign, spearheaded the pro-Connally faction. Bob Sanchez, the advisor to the AFL-CIO, charged that “Garcia is on Connally’s payroll as a paid employee,” according to a report in the Observer. “Garcia did not deny the charge.” Still, the majority compared the candidate to the national platform and voted to rescind the group’s support. Connally stated that he would not make deals with any group and that PASO was “trying to tell me how to run my business.” Albert Fuentes, Peña’s assistant who had also run unsuccessful for Bexar County Treasurer that spring, replied to the gubernatorial nominee “in a hard-hitting speech which drew frequent applause.” Fuentes told the group that Connally had forgotten that “the day the governorship of Texas becomes the private business of one man, we are in for it. If there is any man who thinks he is too big to take orders from the people, than he is too big to be governor.” Hector P. Garcia, the national chairman of PASO, attended the convention, which he described as a reaction to “historical prejudice.” PASO proved, he said, that “people with names like Gonzalez, Fuentes, [and] Pena can do as good a job in American political life as a man named Jones or Smith.”

Peña’s bold response to being snubbed at the state convention and derided by local newspapers saved PASO from fizzling away into insignificance. In fact, it

highlighted a growing dynamism among ethnic Mexican activists and heralded the new power of the organization’s liberal faction. In February, when George Sanchez staged a one-man walkout to protest the conservatives’ victory, fewer than one hundred delegates representing 1,311 paid members debated PASO’s future. In October, despite a deep rift within the organization and a pair of crushing defeats at the polls, Peña challenged the body to rally for its existence and some five hundred activists physically made their way to San Antonio. Liberal and labor activists were the majority of those who answered his call and passed the motion to withdraw PASO’s endorsement of Connally. Although Ed Idar, Hector Garcia, and others had worried that Texas PASO had died during the primaries, the reality was that Peña and the labor and liberal activists had recommitted themselves to the struggle and seized control of the organization. Their influence would continue to grow.135

In November, 1962, Connally defeated Republican rival Jack Cox by a sizable margin. Cox garnered 660,000 votes in the “most impressive” showing by a GOP candidate since 1869. Conally added 100,000 to that total, thanks to a record turnout of 1.5 million voters. The results revealed that conservatives had abandoned the Democratic Party en masse for the GOP, but they “were more than offset by the adhesion of liberal, labor, Negro, and Latin precincts to the Connally banner.” Despite PASO’s official non-endorsement, Peña campaigned for the entire Democratic ticket, primarily to support legislative candidates and Henry B. Gonzalez’s bid for a first full term in Congress.136

Having registered its protests, the party’s left wing pulled the big lever on election day and carried Connally to victory. Throughout 1962, they did not elect their chosen candidate, but they did demonstrate their newfound electoral power. Even conservative Democrats could no longer run as segregationists; in fact, Connally only won by making special appeals to African American and ethnic Mexican voters. This fact, and a new wave of civil rights organizing, set the stage for a new round of multiracial coalition-building in the mid-1960s.

**Conclusion**

At the end of 1962, Texas had made major strides toward becoming democratic, and many black, brown, and white activists looked optimistically to the future. African Americans had discovered a new tactic and desegregated their cities, bringing in new, younger activists, and re-activating older, veteran ones. The sit-in movement they organized drew upon older organizing traditions and contributed to the longer struggles for economic opportunity and independent political power.

At the same time, many black activists joined ethnic Mexicans and white liberals and labor activists of all colors in rallying behind the Democratic Party. Albert Peña and G. J. Sutton parlayed their powerful Bexar County coalition into unprecedented recognition and power at the state and national conventions before diving headlong into the Kennedy-Johnson presidential campaign. Countless labor, civil rights, and black and brown political activists joined them. Local organizing by ethnic Mexicans grew into a

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permanent, if fractured, political force, while organized labor deepened its commitment to “Latin-American Affairs” and civil rights within Texas.

Black, brown, and white activists experimented in building the statewide Democratic Coalition, a body that boosted voter registration and turnout to unprecedented levels but ultimately failed to unify its constituent parts behind consensus candidates. Still, white “independent” liberals, after being crushed by Johnson at the state convention in 1960, found new ways to advance their agenda, namely, by working more closely in collaboration with labor and nonwhite activists. And after experiencing some terrific growing pains, PASO had begun to regroup for the future. Conservative John Connally did manage to nab the governor’s mansion, but he was only able to do so by actively campaigning for votes among black, brown, and labor activists.

Nonetheless, each group understood that they had come painfully close to doing so much more. The activists learned from their mistakes. Albert Peña concluded that both PASO should be “represented not as a pressure group but as a right and a sincere desire to participate in government, because we, too, are government.” It was important to address the particular needs “of our ethnic group,” but only by practicing democracy. It was “most important” that “our groups” [ethnic Mexicans] join with other “groups who have been friends in the past,” namely, “organized Labor...Negro[es]...and independent liberals.” Each of these groups must work together “through mutual respect for each other’s problems,” and there was simply “No other way.”

Peña wrote in SNAP that the coalition and its members failed when they stopped short of their principles. Rather than throw around labels, it was now time to re-state the
coalition’s core beliefs. “I believe that every man has a right to a job, decent wages and
hours, adequate education, the best of medical care and a decent place to live. I believe
that every man should have an equal opportunity to get these things,” Peña wrote. “And
when the Liberal coalition has failed to advocate any one of these basic beliefs, either
individually or collectively, we have failed as a liberal idea.” In the interest of “honest
reappraisal,” he added, “PASO should admit that some of [the] statewide endorsements at
our last convention were not in keeping with the advancement of the cause.” Likewise,
speaking as “a friend of labor,” we must admit that they were wrong at their least
convention “when they didn’t ask the candidates who addressed them to take a strong
position on ‘Right to Work’ Laws—which, after all, are the ‘Guts’ of the Labor
movement.” Such remarks are not intended to be critical, Peña continued. Rather, we
must “re-evaluate our respective positions if we are going to be effective in the future.”

“Our future is to play the role of the conscience of the Liberal movement,” Peña
concluded, “...and address ourselves to the task of eliminating the evils of discrimination,
segregation in job opportunities, education and housing. We must fight for federal aid to
education, medical care for the aged, and the elimination of unfair labor laws. It is in
your hands to change the political complexion of the State of Texas...”138

138 Albert Peña, “County Comment,” SNAP News, August 31, 1962, SABHC (all quotations); “Pena and
Chapter 5 – Democratic Coalitions

Introduction

In the days following the 1962 general election, liberal Democratic strategists began crunching numbers. The returns from the polls verified many of their hunches. African Americans, ethnic Mexicans, urbanites, and Republicans all voted in record numbers, creating a viable two-party state and inexorably shifting the political terrain for the liberal coalition. Most conservatives had defected to the GOP, and those that remained in the Democratic fold continued to hold the reins of power but were rapidly losing their base. The state appeared likely to follow the example set by Bexar County in the previous six years: ethnic Mexicans, African Americans, labor, and white liberals and farmers could constitute a majority if they stuck together, without needing to appeal to more conservative Democrats. The latter group, in turn, would likely continue Connally’s pattern of attempting a coalition with conservative black and brown leaders. And the GOP would continue to grow by cutting into the conservative wing of the Democratic Party, a process that would be expedited as “pragmatist” Republicans continued to overcome the Birchers and other right-wing extremists.

“For liberals as for the G.O.P.,” one report published in the Observer concluded, “1963 can be a year of consolidation or—if they are diverted—a year in which that consolidation is postponed.” In order to succeed, liberal candidates “must be more liberal, more explicitly integrationist,” and more committed to holding the coalition
together. Yet “this is easier said than done, because the pace of change, in racial attitudes and in racial expectations, is far swifter than most liberal politicians realize.”¹

In fact, “the pace of change” turned out to be faster than even the most optimistic prognosticators had predicted. Veteran activist George Sanchez replied to one of the Observer pieces, suggesting that the paper had erred “in assessing the political temper of the minority groups; that is, in underestimating their potential, a potential that can become reality with devastating suddenness.” The rise of Henry Gonzalez and other liberal ethnic Mexicans “symbolized...the revolt against the old guard.” Yet the Observer and liberals generally must be cautious not to “throw the Negroes and the mexicanos...into the old guard camp.” In fact, the weekly paper “through inadvertence, has been guilty of alienating some of the mexicanos who fundamentally are liberals,” while organized labor had done the same through “its treatment of the ‘minority’ groups.”

Sanchez defended his statement “that only mexicanos can speak for the mexicanos,” adding, “I will reiterate that seeming chauvinism by saying that only the Negro can speak for the Negro.” If organized labor and “the self-anointed liberals” want to wield the several hundred thousand votes of these groups, “they had better seek counsel from those Negroes and mexicanos who really know their people.” Coalition organizers needed to ask why and how black voters helped to defeat Yarborough, and to look more closely at where the mexicano vote went following PASO’s failed endorsements. “If the liberals have the gift of leadership,” he concluded, “they had better

begin using it now and not play the last-minute game of ‘after all, under the skin, we are all brothers.’ Hell!”

For the next ten years, black, brown, and white activists all worked to answer Sanchez’s call for leadership in order to fulfill the Observer’s prophecy of liberal ascendency. At nearly every turn they were thwarted by conservatives in both political parties. Yet the process of coalition building succeeded in unleashing the vast “potential” of the state’s African American and ethnic Mexican residents, forever transforming Texas politics. The labor movement stood at the center of the on-the-ground organizing efforts, facilitating coalition meetings, sponsoring electoral and civil rights activism, and working to transform their collective energy into tangible legislative accomplishments and lasting formal political power.

The on-the-ground organizing of the Democratic Coalition in the mid-1960s extended liberalism and the black and brown civil rights movements into the heretofore off-limits reaches of the state, reaching thousands of new rank and file recruits and educating its leading activists experientially. It also consolidated and expanded the power of local coalitions in urban areas, setting the stage for a final wave of upheaval. Beginning with the “first Chicano revolt” in the South Texas hamlet of Crystal City in April 1963, the long posited but ever elusive statewide coalition slowly became a reality. It transformed the lives of its participants and brought their grievances to the forefront of state and national political life. Working in coalition with African Americans and the

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white-led labor movement, the “forgotten people” had become leading political actors, and they did so, as Sanchez had predicted, “with devastating suddenness.”

**Crystal City: From “Pilot Project” to “PASO Doble”**

On April 2, 1963, a coalition of organized labor, PASO, high school students, and ordinary ethnic Mexicans celebrated a hard fought victory in the municipal elections of Crystal City, a small agricultural center in the Winter Garden section of South Texas. For the first time since the advent of Jim Crow in the region fifty years earlier, the majority group of ethnic Mexican working people had discarded the Anglo and ethnic Mexican elites who had long monopolized local politics, replacing the old *patrones* with a group of independent, liberal, ordinary folks. “Los cinco candidatos,” as the five independent candidates came to be known, were drawn from the ranks of the working class, since none of the town’s small time ethnic Mexican professionals were willing to risk their status by joining an electoral revolt against the city’s Anglo leaders. Juan Cornejo, the business agent of the local Teamsters union and an employee at California Packing Co., a local spinach packing house, headed the ticket and was eventually elected mayor.

Historians have hailed the “Crystal experiment” as the opening salvo in the Chicano movement, a first “revolt” against Anglo domination that laid the groundwork for the more vibrant, student-led movement that emerged near the end of the 1960s.4

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3 One early use of the “revolt” phrase was in John S. Shockley, *Chicano Revolt in a Texas Town* (Notre Dame [Ind.]: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974).
This characterization is largely accurate, but scholars have not fully probed the revolt’s relationship to the state’s evolving multiracial, liberal coalition. The election did mark an unprecedented uprising, a challenge to South Texas whites so powerful that the state called out the Texas Rangers to contain it. Yet the revolt was not a sharp break from the past, and it was more immediately connected with the contemporaneous coalition than it was with the future Chicano movement.\(^5\)

In many ways, the Crystal City uprising had its origins in the fall of 1962, when Albert Peña returned from the state Democratic convention in El Paso determined to demonstrate independent ethnic Mexican voting power following John Connally’s snubbing of PASO and local newspapers attacking Peña’s leadership. The rally at the phone booth and the group’s withdrawal of its endorsement of the Democratic gubernatorial nominee made Peña’s point and set PASO back on track for the future. Yet PASO leaders needed a way to go on the offensive after having little success in three years of endorsing candidates for statewide office. “It was the wrong way—the ineffective way,” an anonymous Peña aide told Carlos Conde, a reporter with the *Dallas Morning News*. “We decided to work from the bottom up—organize the rank and file and concentrate on a mayor’s race, or city council or even county sheriff.” Conde added that “Pena and his PASO group wanted to show everyone what the ‘sleeping giant,’ as they like to call the Latin American voters, could do when aroused from its traditional

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\(^5\) Marc Simon Rodriguez pays particular attention to the high school students and recent graduates involved in the Crystal City uprising and argues that the revolt laid the groundwork for the Chicano Movement’s evolution among farmworkers and urban poverty warriors in Wisconsin. The organizing tradition followed the stream of migrant agricultural laborers, first as the youth traveled north, and then back again to Texas as they returned to join La Raza Unida Party in the early 1970s. Marc Simon Rodriguez, *The Tejano Diaspora: Mexican Americanism & Ethnic Politics in Texas and Wisconsin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
doldrums.” The group soon began looking for a “pilot project” that would be “ripe enough for the spectacular political splash that it wanted to make.”

It found a perfect case in Crystal City. There, in the self-proclaimed “spinach capital of the world,” Cornejo and Andrew Dickens, a retired oil field worker, had already launched a poll tax drive among local Mexicanos. Dickens was furious with the County Attorney over a soured land deal, so he joined forces with Cornejo, the local “Teamster-PASO man” and, he judged, another likely dissident. The duo began registering voters first and then went to Teamsters’ regional director Ray Schafer and the statewide PASO’s Peña for help. Cornejo’s local Teamsters union represented about 300 workers, all ethnic Mexicans, so he began there. Next the duo hired unemployed ethnic Mexicans to serve as their canvassers. These campaign workers, according to Conde, “knocked on doors at nights, stopped Latins on the street, in taverns, and even visited the crews out in the fields on pay day.” By the time the drive had concluded, with little outside assistance, Dickens and Cornejo’s campaign had netted 1,129 Spanish-surnamed voters on the local registration rolls. Most were working-class Mexicanos for whom the $1.75 poll tax “came hard,” requiring the organizers to collect nickels and dimes from many individuals who were “on the installment plan.” At the same time, 542 Anglos paid their poll taxes, creating a 2-to-1 margin among registered voters. The total number of political participants was abysmal but not atypical. Less than 1,700 of Crystal City’s population of 10,000 registered to vote. Still, the fact that 8,000 of the town’s residents

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6 Carlos Conde, “Crystal City Gave PASO Pilot Project It Needed,” Dallas Morning News, May 7, 1963, Section 1, 17, reprinted as part of a flyer by Bexar County PASO, 1963, p.1, Albert Peña Papers, UTSA-ITC, Box 1, Folder 18. Bexar County PASO County Chairman Charles Albidress, Jr., added a note to the flyer stating that Conde’s piece was “perhaps, the only purely factual account of on the spot events in Crystal City, although obviously, the roll [sic] of one or two persons is overemphasized.”
were “stoop labor” who were “hopping mad” at the Anglos gave the *Mexicano* organizers hope that they would receive broad-based support moving forward.\(^7\)

With the voter rolls now closed and the numbers on their side, PASO and the regional Teamsters arrived in full force, convinced that a local victory was possible. Money for manpower came from the Teamsters and the Texas State AFL-CIO, while PASO and the union both supplied skilled, experienced political organizers. The first to arrive was Martin Garcia, a PASO district director from Kingsville and a part-time law student at St. Mary’s University in the Westside of San Antonio. The Teamsters hired him, offering a salary of tuition, books, and expenses for his next semester. “His assignment was to plan the campaign, provide a list of candidates and then serve as overall campaign manager,” wrote Conde.\(^8\)

The next professional organizer to arrive in Crystal City was Henry Muñoz, Jr., known to many by his nickname, “The Fox.” Born in Laredo in 1920, Muñoz grew up in a union household headed by his projectionist father. He got a paper route as a child before dropping out of school to learn the printing trade at age 15. The all-ethnic Mexican local of the International Typographical Union (ITU) in Laredo accepted him as an apprentice, and he remained in that position until he was drafted into World War II. He mustered out to San Antonio in 1946 and quickly approached the local ITU affiliate to apply for membership. The union allowed him to work on a temporary permit while he awaited his application, but they forced him to work at night. After a lengthy floor debate, the union members initially refused to admit Muñoz, not because of his competence but because of ethnic Mexican ancestry. Muñoz was permitted to address

\(^7\) *Ibid.*, 1; Letter from Albert Fuentes, Jr., to Friend and Fellow PASO Member, March 14, 1963, Peña Papers, UTSA-ITC, Box 22, Folder 2.

\(^8\) Conde, “Crystal City Gave PASO Pilot Project It Needed,” 1.
the meeting, giving a speech that emphasized his military service alongside countless others who for “fighting for the rights that they were denying [him]... so that we could have a democracy.” He walked out of the meeting, but a re-vote an hour later admitted him to the union. Muñoz quickly became active in the affairs of the local and the larger ITU, joining the union’s “Progressive Party” as it took over the organization and then rising to the rank of international representative. He left the trade to attend college in the late 1950s and graduated from St. Mary’s University in 1960—at age 40.9

Muñoz got a job working for the Bishop’s Committee for the Spanish Speaking, a clerical advocacy organization composed of three cardinals, five archbishops, and seventeen bishops from across the United States and led by Archbishop Robert Lucey of San Antonio. Muñoz was the first lay staffer for the group, which he helped to connect to both ordinary *mexicanos* and various liberal and labor groups nationwide. He developed the Committee’s Migrant Labor Project, which worked to champion the cause of ethnic Mexicans in the U.S. while fighting against the *bracero* program and other low-wage, foreign labor. He made common cause with the Texas AFL-CIO and the larger ethnic Mexican civil rights organizations, supported their joint border “commuter” lawsuit, and contributed to the classic documentary exposé, “Harvest of Shame.” Muñoz also launched a training program with funding from the Merrill Foundation to begin training poor ethnic Mexicans for jobs as tractor-trailer drivers. The local Teamsters union offered the courses for free, and several graduates were placed into high-paying, union jobs.10

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In early 1962, Muñoz moved to expand on this partnership, inviting the Teamsters’ International President Jimmy Hoffa to come to San Antonio to consider the possibility organizing migrant farm workers. The union had intermittently approached agricultural laborers in California and elsewhere, so bringing the campaign to Texas was not totally out of the blue. Several ethnic Mexican farm workers joined Muñoz in greeting Hoffa’s plane at the airport, carrying signs reading “Help us, Jimmy.”

According to one report, Hoffa was “so impressed that he insisted” that the entire group be treated to a relatively expensive banquet planned in his honor (Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez flew back from Washington to speak at the event). Muñoz asked for $350,000 to launch a three-year “pre-organizational program of conditioning the migrants to thought of union effort, and conditioning the state legislature to the thought of easing up some of the anti-labor restrictions now on the books.” Hoffa did not flinch at the price tag, but he was “interested in success,” Muñoz said. Three Teamster field directors were sent to San Antonio in February to conduct a more thorough investigation into whether such an initiative would be viable. Meanwhile, Hoffa’s visit quickly “prompted bitter comments from church and business leaders” in the city. Muñoz defended the infamous union boss:

A banker came to me the other day, complaining about our working with “this racketeer.” I said I wasn’t aware of Hoffa’s ever being convicted of racketeering. I told him, “It’s like these migrants are drowning and Hoffa comes along and throws them a tube, and you tell them don’t take that tube because it comes from Hoffa. Does that make sense?” I told him if his bank would put up $350,000 to study ways to improve life for migrants, I would take it and turn Hoffa down. That quieted him.11

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11 “Hoffa Launches Texas Campaign,” 1 (all quotations).
Hoffa’s field agents apparently decided against a campaign of that magnitude, but the international union did hire Muñoz later in January, 1963, to “study the Latin American migrant force in the United States for the Teamsters.”

Henry “The Fox” recalled that he first visited Crystal City in October, 1962, after “a fellow came over from Crystal City to the Bishops’ Committee and told us about the conditions...” Muñoz traveled to the small town and talked politics with leaders of the local Teamsters union, including Cornejo, who “were interested in the political arena.” The Teamsters represented the employees at Cal-Pack, but only because it was covered by a master contract originating from the company’s much larger plants in California. Local management was fiercely anti-union and anti-Mexican. Still, the unionized workers were better off than most of the city’s migrant “stoop labor,” so Cornejo believed they would risk supporting an insurgent electoral effort. Muñoz recalled that he visited Crystal City to aid the poll tax campaign soon after joining the Teamsters’ staff in January, 1963.

Muñoz’s personal history and previous contact with top Teamsters brass helps to explain how and why the union committed itself so fully to the Crystal City revolt, adding a key coalition partner for local organizers and state PASO leaders alike. The Teamsters’ arrival cannot be attributed simply to the fact that Cornejo was a member or because the union represented a small packing plant there. Those conditions existed in countless hamlets throughout the country. Rather, the Teamsters were specifically

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12 Conde, “Crystal City Gave PASO Pilot Project It Needed,” 1. The Teamsters remain hazy in the historical record. The union’s records have only recently been deposited in an archive, and most of the material is either inaccessible or unprocessed. I recently made contact with the archivist at George Washington University, who is working to make the papers available to researchers. He invited me to visit and promised to help me dig for records related to Texas, but I was not able to do so by this writing.

13 Muñoz, interview by Green, 22-23.
looking to make inroads in Texas—including among agricultural workers—and they had begun to investigate how to do so almost a year earlier. Thus when international union officials learned that a poll tax drive was underway, they realized it was their opportunity to make an entrance. They hired the man they knew, Henry “The Fox” Muñoz, and quickly dispatched him to Crystal City.

Muñoz joined PASO’s Martin Garcia and the local organizers just as the poll tax drive was ending. Teamsters’ regional director Roy Shafer had sponsored Garcia’s activities with a scholarship, and he soon assigned Carlos Moore, a printer by trade who worked for the Teamsters union out of Fort Worth, to join them. Muñoz recalled that the three staffers were welcomed to the town by the Texas Rangers. “...Lo and behold, at the end of January, we had the votes,” Muñoz remembered, referring to the lopsided results of the poll tax drive. The trio of organizers went “down there on the main drive, and we were flagged down and harassed by Captain [A. Y.] Allee. This was January 31 of 1963. From then on, Allee would come in at all hours of the night and take me out into the woods and threaten to shoot me—take me out every night. I could almost set my watch by what time he’d come in...I [knew that] at 12:15 at night he’d be there and take me out forty or fifty miles in the woods and give me all kinds of hell...”

With the poll tax drive complete, Garcia, Muñoz, Moore, and Cornejo began formulating their strategy. Muñoz recalled that they “went to the mayor of Crystal City—a fellow by the name of Holmsenbeck (Mexicanos called him Hold-em-Back)--and all that we asked was one representative—one Mexicano—on the City Council. ‘No,’ he said, ‘Hell, no. That's out of the question.’ Then we decided to fill the ticket...” Garcia called local PASO activists and poll tax drive participants together for a meeting on
February 8. The twenty-three ethnic Mexicans who showed up named their group the Citizens Committee for Better Government (CCBG) and seventeen of them agreed to stand for local office. The list was then trimmed to thirteen, then seven, and finally the group chose the *cinco candidatos*. As anticipated, ethnic Mexican businessmen and professionals wanted nothing to do with the campaign. *Los cinco* were thus workers, like the “lower socio-economic Latin American community” that they sought to organize.

“The candidates represented the plight of their group,” Conde wrote in the *Dallas Morning News*. “Their average education was about the seventh grade. They dressed in workmen’s clothes. They had little knowledge of city economics and government. They deeply resented the Anglos.” They were not the “best qualified” ethnic Mexican candidates by traditional standards, but, as Cornejo pointed out, “We are educated in the way of our people.” Muñoz also recalled the criticism levied at their slate, but he said the decision was simple. “You didn't have many Ph.D.’s and masters’ degrees walking down the street in Crystal City when people [were] starving,” he said. “But we did find cinco candidatos that had the guts and fortitude to run.” Martin Garcia took on what Conde called the “monumental task of shaping up five unpolished hopefuls into presentable candidates, keeping them in line and writing their speeches.”

*Los cinco candidatos* and the three organizers began preparing for the April 2 election, while Peña and Shafer monitored the situation from San Antonio. Albert Fuentes ran back and forth between the two cities and kept them up to date on the campaign’s developments. Garcia took the five candidates to city hall to file for office, but “The clerk said there were no application blanks,” according to Conde. “They didn’t

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14 Conde, “Crystal City Gave PASO Pilot Project It Needed,” 1; Muñoz interview by Green, 24.
argue. They had obtained a Thermo-fax copy earlier and Garcia typed out five applications. They turned these in and demanded a receipt.” They ordered 10,000 campaign posters—1 for every resident of the town; 5 for every registered voter—and developed a message centered on “anti-Anglo” sentiments “based largely on racial, economic and social inequalities.” They began holding “official” meeting every Sunday and “unofficial” gatherings almost every day. “The crowds kept getting larger,” Conde reported. The organizers began identifying and “cultivating” local leaders to organize, manage, and address the growing rallies. Rank and file activists plastered the city with campaign posters, only to have them torn down each night. They posted new ones the following days and collected the torn down posters, displaying the latter at the weekly meetings. “Sure the ‘gringo’ says he loves you,” activists told the crowds. “But he loves you in your place – below him where he can control you.” The torn-down posters were vivid examples of what gringos thought of mexicanos, organizers said. But “This is a democracy, and in a democracy, majority rules. We are the majority.”

Even more telling signs of Anglo resistance were the growing number of economic reprisals and the increasing visibility of the Texas Rangers. Muñoz recalled that the “cinco candidatos became prime targets of the city administration and Captain Allee and his Texas Rangers. . . One of them used to own a small photo shop, and the first thing the city officials did, they declared that he had to put in new wiring and this and that, so actually, they closed him down. The other one was working in a gas station as an attendant, and they fired him.” The Rangers, who were sent by Governor Connally to “keep the peace,” took over the local law enforcement agencies and imposed an

informal curfew that applied only to the town’s ethnic Mexicans. Captain Allee shut down ethnic Mexican bars and clubs and proved true to his reputation of terrorizing and beating ethnic Mexicans who stepped out of line. The rallies continued, but activists faced frequent physical assaults and threats and the hands of the Rangers. Economic reprisals continued against many campaign supporters, and the California Packing Company joined in by firing three ethnic Mexican workers—a man and two women—for wearing campaign “tags” to work.16

This last instance of retaliation proved to be a critical turning point. A “PASO-Teamster man” told Conde that the campaign was “gaining ground daily but the people still showed a weakness...The Latins were afraid that the Anglos would start getting rough with them and that we would not protect them.” But after the firing at Cal-Pack in mid-March, the Teamsters quickly responded. The union contract protected employees from such reprisals, and organizers “moved in swiftly and had [the fired workers] reinstated.” The union members, at least, were convinced that the world was turning upside down. Anglo managers, long able to do what they pleased despite the formal labor agreement, now had to bow down to the pressure from out-of-town Teamsters officials. The electoral revolution would complete the transformation in daily power relations, extending it beyond the work site to City Hall. The rank and files spirits were further bolstered on March 24, when three state representatives from Bexar County, including two ethnic Mexicans, came to Crystal City to speak at a mass rally, as did “PASO and Teamster brass,” probably Albert Peña and Ray Shafer, respectively.17

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17 Conde, “Crystal City Gave PASO Pilot Project It Needed,” 2.
Around the same time the rest of the Democratic Coalition became aware of the campaign and quickly rallied behind it. Albert Fuentes attended Coalition meetings, reported on the campaign, and passed the hat for contributions. Hank Brown overlooked the fact that the Teamsters competed with the state and national AFL-CIO and sent desperately needed, generous funds to the Teamster-PASO Crystal City organizers for the final weeks of the get-out-the-vote efforts. Jim Phelps of Houston, an “independent” liberal who chaired the January, 1963, meeting in which the Coalition was reborn, sent $100 to PASO for the *los cinco* campaign, matching the single largest individual contribution to the effort. Moses LeRoy, the longtime African American labor, civil rights and political activist from Houston and a member of the Coalition’s steering committee, added five dollars to the pot, and professor George Sanchez gave ten dollars more. The statewide PASO also sent out an appeal for contributions from its members and local chapters, raffling off a TV at the rate of five chances per dollar.\(^{18}\)

In the final weeks of the campaign, thanks to the critical financial support from across the state, the Teamster-PASO organizers ramped up their voter education efforts in Crystal City. “For those that could not read, the campaign leaders worked out a numerical system for the voter to memorize,” Conde reported. The organizers prepared “sneak cards,” small versions of a filled out sample ballot that voters could carry (illegally) into the voting booths. Carlos Moore trained the candidates on the election code and other legal matters, leading local people to call him a “big city lawyer” even though he was not an attorney! And Charles Albidress, Jr., of the San Antonio PASO

chapter trained election supervisors to work at the polling places. The night before the election, the candidates staged a final mass rally to prepare the voters for the final push. “Do not be afraid,” PASO’s Albert Fuentes told the crowd. “The victory we win tomorrow is here tonight.” José Ángel Gutiérrez, the leader of a group of local high school students and recent graduates who had served as some of the organizers’ most reliable local activists, also addressed the audience, noting the depth of the discrimination that they faced and reminding the voters that they could begin changing it tomorrow.

On election day, April 2, 1963, the Anglos made one last ditch effort to win the race by suppressing the mexicano vote. Muñoz recalled that “Cal-Pack put up a notice that this particular time on election day, they were going to work overtime--start working at five o’clock in the morning and work until nine o’clock at night.” Once again, the union contract came in handy, protecting the several hundred ethnic Mexican voters who had paid their poll taxes but worked at the plant. A clause in the contract mandated that the company give workers time off to go and vote. Shafer had instructed Muñoz to “read the riot act to the Cal-Pack officials,” and Muñoz “did raise hell.” Each worker ended up getting two hours off to head to the polls. Meanwhile, local “growers told migrant workers that instead of paying them fifty cents per hour to pick carrots, they were going to pay them a dollar, if they stayed in the fields until way past 8:00 P.M.” But the organizers had prepared the ethnic Mexican crew leaders for this tactic, instructing them to begin their shifts in the early morning so they could get the full day’s pay and still make it to the polls. “At four o’clock [in the afternoon] everybody was going to get in the truck and not go home, but [go] straight to city hall and vote. And, that’s exactly what

19 Conde, “Crystal City Gave PASO Pilot Project It Needed,” 1-2 (all quotations on 2).
happened. All the crew leaders got the people to City Hall before the closing of the polls, and they won.”

All five candidates for City Council won by a narrow margin. Soon after, they voted 3-2 to elect Cornejo as Mayor. Yet the harassment and intimidation continued. “Naturally, the establishment didn’t like it,” Muñoz recalled. “They said, ‘Oh, this is bloc voting.’ It was all right when they work it, but not the poor Mexicanos. Oh, no. They’re ignorant, and all that kind of stuff.” The Texas Rangers stayed in town even after any threat of disturbance had subsided. In fact, the cowboy gunslingers continued to physically attack supporters of los cinco, including Mayor Cornejo, whom Captain Allee personally assaulted. The Ranger became the councilmen’s “shadow,” according to one PASO mailing, and when Cornejo complained to Connally, “THE GOVERNOR REFUSED TO LISTEN.” It took an appeal from Sen. Yarborough to U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and the arrival of the FBI before Connally finally withdrew his troops.

Cornejo and company soon discovered that governing was wholly different from campaigning, and ongoing Anglo opposition continued to thwart the new council’s ambitions. Two of los cinco were fired from their jobs just days after the election. Two years later, in 1965, Anglos and elite ethnic Mexicans organized a rival slate of three ethnic Mexican professionals and two Anglos and defeated a new slate of working-class Mexicanos led by Cornejo. The conservatives accepted an elite form of ethnic Mexican

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21 Muñoz, interview by Green, 24-25; Conde, “Crystal City Gave PASO Pilot Project It Needed,” 2.
representation and ultimately ended up improving the living conditions of ethnic Mexican neighborhoods. Yet the independent revolt of *Mexicano* workers had been defeated.²³

The reversal of the “first Chicano revolt” two years later should not, however, detract from the uprising’s earth-shattering short-term impact. For the first time since the advent of Jim Crow in South Texas, ordinary ethnic Mexicans had organized and overcome their Anglo overlords. Perhaps just as importantly, they had also discarded the “Uncle Toms” or “*Tío Tomáses*” of their own ethnic group. An editorial in the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* a month after the election aptly summed up its broader meaning. While the old *patron* system had largely died by 1948—“With few exceptions of a strictly local nature”—it had been replaced by “a distinctive middle class” which “identified itself with the Anglo population rather than the Latin.” If they participated in politics at all, “they tended to side with candidates and slates chosen by Anglos.” Yet the election likely marked a new “benchmark in the political history of Texas,” the editors concluded. “It now seems apparent that the incident of Crystal City represents a revolt against the ‘Uncle Toms’ of the Latin community.” The candidates won with the help of the Teamsters and PASO, and they “represent workers, not the Latin middle class.” The election signaled the renewed strength of PASO, a group built on ethnic Mexicans’ “new awareness” in order to “bring all classes of Latins, especially the middle class, into a coherent political organization” for the first time. Although the future remained unclear, it was likely that ethnic Mexicans through PASO would join “with Anglo liberals and

labor to control the [Democratic] party at most levels. This apparent minority eventually might become a majority and assume control of Texas politics.”\textsuperscript{24}

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The Crystal City election did represent a declaration of independence for ethnic Mexican working people and liberal middle-class leaders like Peña. Yet the editors’ hope that “all classes of Latins,” including the broader ethnic Mexican middle class, would rally around it proved unfounded. In fact, the Crystal City revolt led directly to another split within PASO as well as criticism of the Democratic Coalition’s role from “independent” white liberals.

Surprisingly, these fractures helped rather than hurt both Peña and the Coalition. The controversies surrounding Crystal City led the remaining conservatives within PASO to withdraw permanently from the organization, leaving it securely in the hands of Peña, Fuentes, George Sanchez, Bob Sanchez, and other liberal and labor leaders across the state. These activists were far better equipped than their conservative counterparts to participate in the growing Democratic Coalition, and they could now do so unencumbered by the less-militant middle class activists. At the same time, the Crystal City victory had reaffirmed for labor leaders Hank Brown and the Teamsters’ Ray Shafer why their organizations mattered in the broader civil rights and electoral struggles, pushing their organizations to adopt more radical positions and to extend their participation on-the-ground in addition to their substantial financial contributions. This, in turn, helped them convince “independent” liberals to follow their lead.

The split within PASO centered on one issue: control by the Teamsters. Journalist Carlos Conde reported that the two organizations had agreed to use one another in Crystal City. The campaign was “Teamster-manned,” he added, but “fronted by PASO.” Conde recorded one staffer’s reaction:

“You don’t?” said an active campaign worker. “It was a case of two friends using each other. The Teamsters didn’t want to go at it alone and take the chance of falling flat on their face by themselves. PASO on the other hand could use the manpower and experience of the Teamsters. They would get most of the credit for the victory without spending much money or providing a lot of manpower and it would give them the political prominence and status they wanted.”

Yet this pragmatic, mutually-exploitative and mutually-beneficial relationship proved hard to swallow for many PASO activists, including national president and co-founder Dr. Hector P. Garcia. The Teamsters’ alleged connections to organized crime on the East Coast marked the union as un-American, and the longtime leader of the American G.I. Forum refused to share his bed with Jimmy Hoffa regardless of the short-term benefits. Organized labor of any persuasion remained anathema to many conservative PASO members, leaders like Laredo’s Judge Benavides, or the Bonillas of Corpus Christi, who had long argued that participating in coalitions with labor or accepting labor’s money amounted to accepting external control of PASO. The confrontational nature of the Crystal City campaign also irked many conservatives, who balked at the organizers’ “anti-Anglo” rhetoric and their electoral strategy “based largely on racial, economic and social inequalities.”

In contrast, liberal PASO leaders defended the coalition effort and Peña’s leadership of PASO. In McAllen, labor advisor Bob Sanchez and liberal county

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commissioner Leo J. Leo explained to critics that the organization was not creating a “race problem” between Anglos and Mexicanos but was responding to fifty years of discrimination. Until ethnic Mexicans are proportionately represented in government, they argued, future Crystal City-style campaigns would be necessary. Neither the Teamsters nor the AFL-CIO were “sponsoring” PASO, they added, and the organization in any case had “mature” enough leadership to not need labor or any other “political boss...to do our thinking for us.” The coalition with Teamsters was appropriate and effective in this local effort, but such collaboration did not include a future commitment to continuing the partnership elsewhere. Sanchez added, “Certainly PASO shall look to the possibility of forming a coalition with any other organization or individual in a locality wherever we shall find it convenient but we shall certainly always retain our individuality and shall never become either subservient or controlled...” PASO remained steadfastly committed to fighting all forms of “bossism” and for advocating democracy. Sanchez and Leo concluded that they looked forward to a day without distinctions based on ethnic origins, a moment in which they could “disband PASO and quietly go home.”

For his part, Peña faced harsh personal criticism for the part he played in the Crystal City revolt. In early May, just one month after los cinco triumphed, the other four members of the Bexar County Commissioners Court censured Peña for a letter he wrote in support of the insurgent candidates, charging the PASO leader with “injecting racism into the election.” Commissioner A. J. Ploch led the charge against Peña and

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26 Bob Sanchez, with Leo J. Leo, May 31, 1963, R.P. (Bob) Sanchez Papers, BLAC, Box 5, Folder 1. The archival document is a carbon copy of text signed by Leo, but it has handwritten corrections, including Leo’s name being crossed off and replaced by “Bob Sanchez.” The document appears to be a speech but the exact context is unknown. It could also be a letter to the editor, the text of a radio address (Sanchez did these frequently), or something else. Either way, it was clearly designed to respond to specific criticisms of PASO’s role in Crystal City, and the date is unambiguously marked.
presented the resolution after “a heated session of name-calling.” Peña had written that he had “all the faith in the world that our people in Crystal City are proud and conscientious, and that you will unite and elect the only true Mexicanos in the race...” Ploch’s resolution asserted that the city and county had long been leaders “among Southern and Texas communities in their efforts to eliminate racial discrimination” and that Peña “himself practices discrimination” despite being elected from a 50% Anglo precinct. Peña “even used a ‘County of Bexar’ letterhead” to address the people of Crystal City, giving the “false impression that Bexar County itself was supporting the vile and vicious attempt to set citizen against citizen.” The Court thereby “comdemn[ed]” Peña for acting “for personal and political gain.” Peña fiercely protested the resolution, claiming that their real objection to Crystal City was the fact that 95% of the people voted. The resolution passed with his sole dissenting vote. The following day, he added that the whole issue was a “red herring” designed to distract the public from the more important issue of funding Aid to Dependent Children, a welfare program.27

Such was the atmosphere that prevailed as PASO prepared to hold its second annual state convention in early June, 1963. Journalist David T. Lopez wrote in the Corpus Christi Caller-Times that “A well-organized, Teamster-financed attempt to take over” PASO appeared imminent, with attorney Willie Bonilla of Corpus leading the charge to stop it. Albert Fuentes had planned to run for the state chairmanship, but his personal role as “one of the key strategists” of the Crystal City campaign had eroded his support. Fuentes then launched a “draft Peña” movement to convince the organization’s

27 “Resolution Blasts Pena; Sparks Fly,” San Antonio News, May 9, 1963, 11-A; “Pena Discounts Censure,” San Antonio News, May 10, 1963; clippings of both in San Antonio Public Library Vertical Files [hereinafter SAPL], Commissioner Albert Peña folder. Peña was referring to the percentage of registered voters, not the total population.
only chairman (and his boss) to stand for another term. Martin Garcia added that “The theme of the convention will be ‘Remember Crystal City...We are going to push the idea that the organization must be aggressive and find allies wherever it can in order to be successful.” Garcia chaired the district that included the dissidents from Nueces County, but he was confident that the Peña-Fuentes faction of which he was part would prevail. “The convention will develop into a fight between liberals and ultra-liberals,” he said, “—those who want to follow the path of Crystal City and those who want to sit and wish the problem away.” In contrast, Bonilla “said he believes PASO should concentrate on political education of Latin American citizens,” limiting its activities to voter registration, discussion of issues, and non-partisan candidate forums. The battle lines were thus clearly drawn.²⁸

The convention itself unfolded as predicted, with Peña’s “ultra-liberal” faction prevailing by a wide margin. The more conservative faction counted their votes and knew that they had lost soon after they arrived. William Bonilla, aided forcefully by his brother Tony and national chairman Hector Garcia, attempted a wide range of parliamentary tactics in order to boost their vote totals, but each maneuver was rejected. Hector Garcia blasted Peña and gave a speech “implying [that] PASO [was] run by Teamsters,” according to the official minutes. When the final vote for chair was taken, Peña defeated Willie Bonilla by a vote of 41-20. Garcia walked out of the hall in disgust, but the Nueces County delegation did not follow him out as expected. Rather, “Bonilla, after outcome of election has praise for Albert Pena, said newspapers are wrong about binding PASO with Teamsters, as far as being run by the union men. His words were for

unity, Bonilla’s motion to elect Pena unanimously passed.” Hector Garcia met with reporters outside and complained that the delegates had chosen Ray Shafer of the Teamsters over him, the longtime leader of the American G. I. Forum, and by extension, he felt, the Mexican American civil rights struggle. Ramiro Casso and Leo J. Leo, both “ultra-liberals” from the Valley, replied that Garcia’s “insinuations” of Teamster control were “just bunk,” adding that Garcia had planned to walk out no matter what and that his real dispute with Peña was purely personal.

In fact, the conservatives’ campaign against the Crystal City cohort both preceded the convention and represented a permanent split in its wake. Prior to the gathering, Hector Garcia organized a rival PASO chapter in San Antonio, a group led by Henry Gonzalez’s aide Lalo Solis. A month after the convention, the Nueces County chapter led by Garcia and the Bonillas voted to withdraw from the state organization, but a local liberal organized another club and promised to seek recognition from Peña. Both groups operated under the same name, leading reporter David Lopez to conclude that the county was stuck with a “confusing ‘PASO doble’” (“double PASO”).

Across the state, bitter and disenchanted conservatives withdrew en masse from the organization, and some even flirted with reviving the Viva Kennedy clubs, creating a “Political Union,” or some other “PASO doble” that could outflank Peña’s group. Gilbert Garcia, the G.I. Forum leader who hit the road for PASO’s leg of the Democratic Coalition poll tax drive in early 1962, fired off a pair of angry letters to Ed Idar, who had

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29 Minutes of PASO State Convention, June 8, 1963, Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 3.
30 David Lopez, “Pena Faction Keeps PASO Reins,” Corpus Christi Caller-Times, June 10, 1963; “Valley PASO Leaders Deny Teamsters Link,” Valley Evening Monitor, June 10, 1963—copies of both in Ed Idar Papers, BLAC, Box 9, Folder 3. Lopez reports that the Bonillas joined Garcia’s walkout, but Casso and Leo deny this in the Valley Evening Monitor. The official minutes suggest that the latter report is accurate.
skipped the convention after his resignation from PASO and “all political activities” the previous summer. Garcia claimed that the convention outcome was apparent as soon as arrived. “The labor people had its big guns, Don Yarborough people had its goons, Teamsters were heavy, and the liberals from Houston combined with Austin were ready [sic]. There wasn’t a Chinaman’s chance much less a Mexican chance…” The G. I. Forum people were largely absent, and several “sincere and honest” chapters were conspicuously absent. Several “paper” groups led by labor activists carried most of the convention weight, he added. But his own list of paid up PASO members by county suggested that the question was not sincerity but level of organization. In Dallas, Franklin Garcia of the Meat Cutters had organized a large club, as had Martin Garcia in his hometown of Kingsville. Zavala County, home of Crystal City, boasted a large chapter of over 100 members, as did the liberal PASO groups in Harris County (Houston) and Bexar. On the other hand, Garcia’s Tarrant County club counted only twenty-five members, and his “sincere and honest” allies simply did not show up.32

When the dust settled, Texas State PASO and most of its local affiliates were firmly in the hands of Albert Peña and his liberal/labor faction. Albert Fuentes, though drawing severe criticism at the convention, was re-appointed as state executive secretary, its top administrative post. More importantly, the dead weight of the more conservative activists was gone. PASO was free to pursue future Crystal Cities at the local and statewide levels, and Peña remained its spokesman. The convention concluded with a series of routine resolutions addressing the bracero program, the “commuter problem,” and the poll tax, as well as a series of new initiatives. The group reaffirmed its

commitment to nonpartisanship, but it also sent congratulations to Senator Ralph Yarborough for his stance against the Texas Rangers in Crystal City. It also reaffirmed its independence from external control and its policy that all members must respect the majority’s decisions. Finally, PASO delegates pledged to act in “solidarity with other minority groups.”  

All of this added up to a new direction for the future, one centered on militant, confrontational organizing, support for independent candidates, and a general willingness to engage in coalitions with labor, liberals, and African Americans. Peña explained his position regarding the controversy over Crystal City and the future of PASO in his remarks to convention. “I have no apologies to make,” he said. “Contrary to some reports” that the people there were “agents of a mysterious and dangerous PASO conspiracy led by Albert A. Peña, Jr.,” the truth is that “the sleeping giant simply woke up... So the Mexican-American voters organized politically and made the necessary changes—not by bullets, by ballots.” PASO served as a guide, but the revolt was led by the people of Crystal City. PASO would play a “major role” in the coming years, he added, working within the liberal coalition. “And the number one issue, the number one problem, is the issue of civil rights for everyone, and what is more important, equal opportunities to obtain these rights.” Peña closed by acknowledging that he had made mistakes and that the group had experienced several “differences of opinions, and at times heated debates. But,” he added, “this is the way it is in a democracy.”

As he knew, their work was just beginning.

33 Minutes of PASO State Convention, June 8, 1963.
34 Albert Peña, “County Comment,” June 14, 1963, including excerpts of his address, typescript in Peña Papers, UTSA-ITC, Box 22, Folder 8.
The Black Civil Rights Movement at a Crossroads

“Texas Is Integrating,” read the headline of a special report in the liberal *Texas Observer* in late June, 1963. The lengthy article detailed the advances and limitations of desegregation in the Lone Star State, noting that “Integration has become respectable” even as economic issues continued to constrain African Americans’ aspirations. “With alacrity that would be easy to exaggerate but is nevertheless slightly dizzying, public officials and private businessmen in the state have been opening white-only facilities and schools to Negroes.” Only East Texas, “the left anchor of the deep South,” and the “rurally-dominated Texas legislature” remained as holdouts.

Yet the remainder of the article continued to outline all of the areas in which black Texans remained far from equal. In employment, “In the jobs they can get and the pay they can get for them, Texas Negroes lag behind whites.” The federal government had begun to reverse this trend with “compensatory” action in favor of African Americans in a few well-publicized cases, including at the Dallas Post Office and several large government contractors. Nearly all of organized labor had begun integrating, and its leadership was “firmly in favor of equal treatment and integration of Negroes into all Texas unions.” Yet craft union leaders continued to drag their feet on admitting black members, and the legislature balked at the Texas AFL-CIO’s efforts to win new state laws that would have prohibited all employment discrimination, by union and company alike. Outside of East Texas, most restaurants and theaters had quietly integrated, but few African Americans could afford to patronize them anyway. Schools had begun integrating, but only under court orders and with anything but “all deliberate speed.” The Democratic Coalition had integrated black voters into the party’s liberal wing, and
conservative Democrats and even Republicans had begun to embrace African Americans. “Integration thus makes much news in Texas,” the piece concluded, “but continued segregation seldom does.”

The black civil rights movement, which had burst onto the scene with the sit-ins of 1960, had seemingly retreated from view in the face of continued progress. White and black businessmen congratulated one another on their enlightened leadership and their success in accomplishing integration while avoiding the protracted, violent conflicts that raged across the South.

Yet most ordinary African Americans remained far from content. Economic opportunities were inaccessible and political power elusive. Beneath the veneer of civility and peaceful advancement, liberal and working-class black activists continued to organize. They were forced to maneuver around the new political realities within their communities: namely, the facts that the novelty of integration had expired, that many of their erstwhile allies had been incorporated into the white-led power structure, and that so much still remained to be done. At both the local level and state-wide, African American activists responded to these challenges by deepening their connections across racial lines. In San Antonio, multiracial coalition-building was nothing new. But in Houston and statewide the growth of ethnic Mexican political power helped the most militant black activists—led by civil rights unionists Moses and Erma LeRoy—outflank their more conservative opponents. Finally, in the state capital a single iconoclast joined the Democratic Coalition and helped push it further than anyone thought it would go.

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36 See, for example, “A Dark-Skinned Throng Before the Court,” Texas Observer, March 7, 1963, 7-8.
African American activists in San Antonio continued to set the standard for militancy in Texas. As they had for more than a decade, G. J. Sutton, Rev. Black, and Eugene Coleman maintained the fight for complete integration, economic opportunity, and independent political power. They had contributed directly to the sit-in movement in their city and expanded it to include not only consumer access but employment for African Americans. They made significant progress toward their long-term goals, yet the Good Government League and the Chamber of Commerce still dominated local civic and economic life. Restaurants and theaters had “voluntarily” desegregated their accommodations and staffs, the elites claimed, and African Americans should be grateful for the gifts they had received. The militant black activists who frequented the SNAP House were not. They wanted justice to be guaranteed, not as a gift, but “as a right,” in words of Rev. Black. They demanded that “voluntary” commitments must be replaced with an ordinance—there must be integration by law. Above all, there must be democracy; the activists continued to demand and work for an independent voice in the city’s and state’s governance.

As always, electoral politics and civil rights organizing dovetailed. G. J. Sutton first ran for the San Antonio city council in the spring of 1961, around the same time that local activists were fighting for jobs at Handy Andy and launching the first demonstrations to integrate movie theaters. Although it predated the Crystal City uprising by two years, Sutton’s 1961 campaign sheds light on the dynamics at play in the city politics throughout the early 1960s. Sutton met fierce opposition from the business-friendly Good Government League, and that combined with the poll tax and the at-large electoral system all but ensured his defeat. Still, “...Sutton did himself and the city of San
Antonio proud. He drew representative votes from all sections of the city,” wrote student activist Bill Donahue in SNAP. The large number of votes that Sutton drew should make him influential even though he was defeated. His campaign needed a ninety percent turnout from the Eastside’s African American precincts to offset the conservative Northside, but he didn’t get it, Donahue added. Many black voters supported the bond for freeway construction, but they voted against Sutton—casting votes, in Donahue’s words, “against their unborn children, future Negro representation in the city government, and higher wages for all.” Donahue added that this was America and anyone was free to do as he pleased, and to support candidates of one’s own choosing. But, he added, “I find it impossible to comprehend the reason a person...would go cavorting around a Negro, or a white precinct for that matter, attempting to persuade persons to vote for a white man who had done nothing and hasn’t promised to do anything for the Negro, and in so doing [commit] the JUDAS act of stabbing a fellow Negro in the back.”

Sutton ran again in 1962, and he again confronted opposition from the GGL and conservative African Americans. Independent black candidates simply could not win. Still, they continued to run in order to protest the domination of the GGL, add their strength to coalition tickets, and build political support for the future. For example, on April 9, 1962, just a month before the first primary that year, Sutton, Rev. Black, and Archie Johnson sponsored a town hall meeting, to be held at Black’s Mt. Zion First Baptist Church on three consecutive weekday evenings. The theme for the meetings was “School for Community Political Participation.” Dr. Bill Crane, a white liberal government professor at St. Mary’s University on the Westside, was the key note

37 Bill Donahue, “In Our City,” SNAP News, April 14, 1961, SABHC, UTSA-ITC, Box 3.
speaker, while “other local dignitaries” joined various panels. The school also included two demonstration voting machines so “the public” could come and acquaint themselves with how to actually pull the lever on election day.39

Political activities continued to contribute to civil rights organizing and vice versa. In the fall of 1962, local NAACP president Harry V. Burns sent a letter to Mayor W. W. McAllister criticizing the city for failing to end racial discrimination. Such failure, Burns wrote, “is not only retarding moral progress, but is also retarding economic progress,” as a group of 750 black civilian Air Force workers refused to move to San Antonio’s Randolph Field in protest of the city’s ongoing segregation. Burns added that the available housing remained sub-standard for African Americans “because of the racial pattern.” The Mayor replied that San Antonio “certainly has no integration problems at all” and “Segregation is virtually nonexistent.”40

The Mayor’s intransigence and willful ignorance touched off a new wave of protest activities in the local NAACP, led by Burns and Rev. Black. On October 23, 1962, according to historian Robert Goldberg, Burns again wrote to McAllister asking that the City Council “pass an ordinance outlawing discrimination in public accommodations.” The Mayor refused to hold public hearings or put the item on the council agenda, and replied that “The majority opinion” among council members “was that we were stepping out of bounds as a government agency to direct the policy of private business.” McAllister reiterated the city’s preference that private businesses integrate in a voluntary manner. On February 13, 1963, Burns, Rev. Black, and one white and one ethnic Mexican traveled as a coalition to the council chambers to deliver

39 “Town Hall Meeting,” SNAP News, April 6, 1962, SABHC.
their own proposed ordinance that would levy a fine on any merchant who discriminated based on race, religion, or color. The council took it under advisement before rejecting it two weeks later, refusing “coercion of white businessmen as the means to integration,” as Goldberg put it. “City officials counseled patience and favored continuing the voluntary approach...” while appointing a committee to further “study” the NAACP proposal.41

The political motivations of the GGL-dominated city council and GGL mayor were never far from the surface. The activists’ push for an integration ordinance coincided with municipal elections, and this year the NAACP and SNAP House crowd again fielded an independent candidate for the city council. This time it was Rev. Black. Goldberg writes that the business-friendly council “had no intention of injecting a potentially explosive issue into the campaign.” A less obtuse summation would be that the council felt it could continue to ignore the desires of the city’s black activists. Sutton, Black, and other activists saw through the council’s strategy. The Reverend said that the creation of the committee was “a delaying action...It was studied 100 years ago and brought forth the Emancipation Proclamation...All that is under discussion now is a remnant of slavery.” Sutton threatened to appeal to President Kennedy to ask the federal government to withhold from making future military investments in San Antonio until the council passed the ordinance. “The blood will be on your hand,” he told the council.42

Rev. Black polled more than 15,000 votes, gaining support from a diverse range of the city’s residents living in “all sections of town.” He trailed his opponent by only 1,800 votes. “The election proved to the world that we can all live together as neighbors, friends, and brothers,” declared SNAP News. “Without a doubt the past City Council

42 Ibid., 366.
election was the biggest in the City’s history.” Black showed that “we live in a community that can look beyond the color of a man’s skin and vote for a man that is qualified.” In the event of a future vacancy on council, “a cross section of the community should be consulted” and Rev. Black would be a good representative to all. In his “County Comment” column, Albert Peña added that Black “won the respect of the community. No political campaign is entirely lost if issues and principles are discussed. And Rev. Black raised and forcefully articulated the primary issue in the Campaign: the need for the minority voice on the Council, to stand-up and speak-up and explain minority problems.” Minorities, in this case, include not just African Americans and ethnic Mexicans but also organized labor and other “social, economic, and educational minorities.” Rev. Black would speak for them all, Peña said. He “lost the first skirmish, but he will eventually win the battle. And San Antonio will be a better town as a result.” (The election coincided with the Crystal City uprising, which Peña did not mention in his column.)

The council-appointed committee eventually reported back and encouraged an “accelerated voluntary desegregation program conducted under city government auspices,” according to Goldberg. Rev. S. H. James, educator Joseph Scott, and other “traditional” black leaders supported the new plan, but it was not good enough for the more militant Eastside activists who frequented the NAACP and SNAP. “They were giving the privilege,” Rev. Black later recalled, “We didn’t want a privilege, we wanted a right. They were holding the power in their own hands.” Integration was not a gift to be bestowed. It needed to be the law of the land, Black added in 2008, now 91-years old.

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43 “The Big Race” and Albert Peña, “County Comment,” SNAP News, April 12, 1963. SABHC.
and nearly jumping out of his wheelchair and raising his voice: “I WANTED IT AS A RIGHT!”

The San Antonio city council continued to drag its feet and refused to re-consider the ordinance. Still, for the Eastside activists, action in the electoral field and civil rights organizing both contributed to their long-term goals of achieving independent political power. Sutton, Black, and Burns soon escalated their combined struggle against voluntary desegregation into a statewide fight.

They found a willing partner in Austin, a man named Booker T. Bonner. “B.T.,” as he was normally known, was a self-styled “lone wolf,” but by 1963 he had become one of the state’s most recognizable civil rights activists. Born in rural Wallis to the southwest of Houston in 1927, Bonner was an unlikely candidate for leadership in the blossoming multiracial struggle for democracy in Texas. He was not from a leading family, like G. J. Sutton, nor was he a union leader like Houston’s Moses LeRoy. He was not a minister or a lawyer or an undertaker. He was the son of a sharecropper and seamstress who took in boarders to make ends meet, but, B. T. later recalled, he “had a photostatic mind where I could read and remember” everything. Still, native intelligence did not result in upward mobility for a black man in rural East Texas in the 1930s and ‘40s. Bonner’s mother sent him to school in the relatively large town of Jefferson before he ended up in Houston, where he graduated high school in 1944. He ended up in the service and was part of a group that occupied Korea at the tail end of World War II. He intermittently attended Texas Southern University using veterans’ benefits, but he

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dropped out in 1950 when his mother abruptly died. Her passing drove him crazy, and for the next two years he struggled with alcoholism before he lay down in the center of a highway and was hit by a car. Bonner survived being run over and recuperated in a Veterans Administration hospital. He eventually made his way to Austin, where he planned to enroll at the all-black Huston-Tillotson College. He ended up going to the barely-integrated University of Texas instead—because a summer session class there cost only eight dollars. B. T. got himself one of the few jobs available to black men in Austin—a cook—and began working his way through school. He majored in history and government and hoped to become a teacher.45

In 1960, a friend of Bonner’s invited him to a “Stand-In” at a movie theater on the university’s drag, and B. T. quickly became a notorious civil rights activist, an iconoclast that rarely agreed with his fellow organizers and who was comfortable being a “lone wolf” if others refused to go along with him. As in San Antonio, the protestors’ strategy called for demonstrators to go to the ticket window, ask if they would sell tickets to members of all races, and when they said no, go to the back of the line and do it again. In Austin, a group called Students for Direct Action (SDA) coordinated the demonstrations. Bonner recalled that whites were “running it” and about seventy of the eighty protestors were white. The strategy “didn’t make sense to me,” Bonner said. So the second time that he approached the box office, he asked to talk to the manager instead of politely returning to the line. It scared the SDA leaders, who quickly intervened and moved him away from the window. “Here’s this new one who isn’t following the rules,” Bonner remembered “…I didn’t want to waste my time.” On the third pass through Bonner again

45 Booker T. Bonner, first interview by author, Houston, May 11, 2010, file 1, 0:00-26:50.
asked to talk to the manager and then stayed at the window until he came to talk to me. Again, the SDA leaders removed him, and then took him about for a beer to explain the strategy to him. But Bonner would not be convinced. “I disagreed with the format,” he added.  

Bonner made a name for himself outside activist circles in March, 1961, when he decided to chart his own course for the ongoing desegregation struggle. He staged a one man hunger strike in front of the Texas Theater, a “hungry vigil” that lasted over sixty hours. “Last November it was, I was walking a picket line up and down here,” he explained to the Texas Observer, “and it dawned on me that I was angry, that the situation was wrong and [thought] what could I do to impress people how serious this was.” Bonner maintained that he was not a member of SDA, who had continued to hold periodic demonstrations at this theater and another down the street. In fact, B.T. had brought the idea to an SDA meeting but then balked when a white member called for a vote. The “lone wolf” thus sat on a stool by himself near a lamppost in front of the box office, where he refused to eat and drank only four glasses of water throughout the duration of his protest. About ten supporters, mostly white students, kept him company at different times. “The intention...was to bring attention to what was happening here and to try to prevail upon a person’s mind,” Bonner added. Passers-by shouted various epithets at him, and on two different occasions mobs of whites rushed him but ultimately let him be. The bold, individual action in the capital city captured the attention of the

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news media, and “From that point on I was considered one of the most radical blacks in
the state,” he later recalled.47

In 1962, Bonner, like activists around the state, supplemented his civil rights
activities by venturing into electoral politics. He first became involved during Don
Yarborough’s gubernatorial campaign, but again, he “disagreed with the format.” The
white liberal staffers went to Austin’s black ministers in order to gain support for the
effort, but Bonner believed they were barking up the wrong tree. “I’ve always had a
problem with them thinking that preachers led the black community. Most blacks don’t
go to church, just like most whites don’t,” Bonner recalled. “I tried to explain to Don that
he wasn’t going about getting the black vote right, but they...didn’t have time. I said that
John Connally was going to beat them 2-to-1 in our neighborhood” of East Austin.
Campaign staffers were incredulous, stating that they had just been there. “I said that he
had been meeting with the political and religious types; I had just been at the
barbershops. They had all gone to a state convention [of barbers], where they saw a
speaker named John Connally.” Disgusted, Bonner refused to work for the campaign in
the run-off. But he continued to work on his own, in order to prove a point. “I’m going
to show you what could have happened,” he recalled saying. “I’m going to work two of
those 2-to-1 precincts” where Yarborough had lost badly and reverse the outcome for the

47 Ibid, 35:45-38:50, 41:50 (last quotation); “One Man’s Protest,” Texas Observer, March 18, 1961, 3. For
more on the stand-ins in Austin, see also “Students Demonstrate Against Texas Theater,” Texas Observer,
December 9, 1960, 5; Ronnie Dugger, “UT Stand-Ins Will Continue,” Texas Observer, December 30, 1960,
1-2; “Stand-Ins In Austin Reach Peak,” Texas Observer, February 18, 1961, 1, 3; and “Austin Theaters
Give In,” Texas Observer, September 9, 1961, 1, 3. The leader of SDA was Chandler Davidson, who later
became a sociologist at Rice University and an expert witness on behalf of Houston litigants who
challenged the city’s at-large voting system under the Voting Rights Act. One of the group’s faculty
mentors and participants was Sandra Cason, later known as Casey Hayden, who became a leader in SDS,
SNCC, and the radical feminist movement.
run-off. “And I turned them around, along with a third nearby,” Bonner added. “So we became a little more compatible, started talking again after the election.”

B.T. Bonner was thus a wildcard, totally brilliant and maddeningly iconoclastic. He chafed at white students, at white liberal organizers, at black ministers and traditional elites, and he claimed that he had a better formula for organizing African Americans for civil rights and political action. He would soon have an opportunity to prove his point.

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While the black civil rights struggles in San Antonio and Austin fostered future demonstrations and activities in the electoral arena, the situation in Houston in 1963 remained vastly different. There, in a city that one journalist termed “a Backwater of the Revolt,” the sit-ins had served to strengthen the hands of black businessmen, who contributed financially to the cause while working behind closed doors to undermine ongoing militant protests. Following their effective takeover of the PYA in the fall of 1961, black elites in Houston worked to contain future demonstrations while improving their relationship with the city’s white political and economic leaders. They continued to participate in the HCCO, but increasingly they worked in their own, upper-class organizations. And they were wildly successful in terms of gaining recognition and patronage from white elites, in large part because they promised and effectively delivered a significant portion of the city’s vast black electorate.

Working-class African Americans and the city’s more militant activists disagreed internally over the best way to respond. The LeRoys and other liberals continued to seek independent political power and deepened their partnerships with like-minded ethnic

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48 Bonner, first interview by author, file 1, 38:50, 50:10-52:40.
49 Friedman, “Houston, a Backwater of the Revolt.”
Mexicans and whites in PASO and the Harris County Democrats. Others, including the Middletons of the Laborers Local #18, joined the elites in demanding jobs and patronage from “moderate” whites. Howard Middleton, the former night student demonstrator and officer of the union, dabbled in the liberal coalition that included the Harris County Democrats but remained a steadfast supporter of County Judge Bill Elliott, a moderate Democrat. In his view, the liberals simply could not match Elliott’s offer of jobs. Such loyalty paid dividends. Under the leadership of the Middleton brothers, the all-black Local #18 grew from a few hundred to over 5,000 members, wages jumped exponentially, and the quantity of work grew to make the job steadier than ever before. Howard became the union’s training director and worked to elevate some union members to semi-skilled positions (though black workers were still excluded from the skilled craft unions). His brother Jimmie’s voice became one of the most important within the HCCO, where he brokered deals that succeeded in channeling many black voters into Judge Elliott’s fold, at least at the local level.50

In all likelihood, Moses LeRoy privately scoffed at Middleton’s arrangement, noting the a priori limitations of power obtained through patronage. Yet publicly the veteran civil rights unionist continued to walk a fine line between his history of radical convictions, his desire to build broad multiracial alliances, and his still paramount need to cultivate support within the HCCO. He was able to do so thanks to his continued support among black unionists and his neighbors in the Third Ward. By effectively organizing

50 Middleton interview by author. In 1964, Judge Elliott reciprocated by appointing Howard as the county’s first Manpower Commissioner, a position that allowed him to shape future job training and other War on Poverty programs.
his precinct, he remained an officer of the HCCO and maintained a degree of influence even as the organization became more conservative.\textsuperscript{51}

Yet his strategy was only partially successful. While LeRoy and other liberal activists had for a period successfully mediated between the black elites and the student demonstrators, and they had continued the fight through the NAACP and HCCO, they struggled to keep their footing by the dawn of 1963. Direct action demonstrations and militant civil rights organizing on the order of San Antonio or Austin had all but disappeared.

As in other parts of the state, civil rights and political organizing went hand in glove, but in Houston that meant that the city’s erstwhile leaders of the direct action struggle now stumped for conservative candidates in order to win patronage. Their vehicle was the United Political Organization (UPO), a statewide body based in Austin but harboring close ties to black elites across the state. Organized in early 1963, it brought together black leaders who had supported John Connally’s successful gubernatorial bid. Rev. H. Rhett James, who had led the sit-ins in Dallas earlier in the decade, served as the group’s executive secretary. Hamah King, an attorney who led the efforts to bail out and represent student PYA demonstrators in Houston, served as its state vice-president, while George Washington, Jr., another key attorney from the Houston sit-in movement, rode the UPO to a high level appointment in the state government. Educator Joe Scott of San Antonio received was honored at the UPO’s July, 1963,

\textsuperscript{51} Chandler Davidson, fieldnotes on Moses and Erma LeRoy, January 25, 1979, Houston, Texas. Chandler Davidson Texas Politics Research Collection, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University, MS 259, Box 9, Folder 6.
convention, and he used the occasion to attack black activists who partnered with organized labor.52

The UPO “is at present a conservative Negro organization,” the *Texas Observer* concluded. “Its leaders do not renounce militance for civil rights; they simply do not practice it, and they support politicians who view it askance. The main thing U.P.O. wants from these politicians in appointments and jobs.” Ronnie Dugger, the *Observer*’s editor, was willing to give it the benefit of the doubt, adding that “Negroes can not be blamed any more than anyone else for giving in to the benefits men in power hand out to those who support them politically,” and it was indeed possible that the UPO would remain distant from some of Connally’s big business bedfellows. Still, Dugger added, as long as M.J. Anderson of Austin, “the leading pro-Connally Negro politician in Texas” continued to steer the group, the UPO “has no chance of being regarded as an independent, democratic organization.”53

The black civil rights movement in Texas thus found itself at a crossroads in the spring and summer of 1963. In Houston, the “backwater of the revolt,” a group of conservative elites had seized control of the direct action struggle and effectively removed it from the scene. Statewide, led by the UPO, a group of “conservative” African Americans sought to direct the energies of the movement into political action for candidates who promised patronage. On the other hand, in San Antonio, Austin—and even among veteran activists in the left wing of Houston’s HCCO—civil rights organizers continued to demonstrate in streets while also working to wed the struggle to

liberal candidates and multiracial coalitions for independent political power. It was not yet clear which tendency would prevail.

**Advancing Democracy**

The rise of the UPO, the successful “Chicano revolt” in Crystal City, the liberal victory in the PASO convention, and the new electoral alignment after 1962—all of these led black, brown, and white liberal and labor activists to recommit themselves to political action in the coming years. They renewed and expanded the Democratic Coalition, transforming it from a loose alliance among mutually-suspicious parts into a diverse whole that worked to expand the franchise by revamping its leadership structure and putting unprecedented numbers of boots on the ground. What one newspaper called the “marriage” between “the three ethnic groups” enjoyed a “honeymoon period” in which all of the pieces of the puzzle briefly came together in a coordinated campaign for not just political power but labor and civil rights. It reached deeper into the state’s black and brown neighborhoods than ever before, re-activating old networks of activists and reaching hundreds of thousands of new block walkers. It created space for PASO and labor to extend their joint organizing efforts, helping the Texas AFL-CIO become a civil rights organization in its own right. And it supported the revival of the black civil rights movement, resulting in a new wave of direct action protests and culminating in the state’s largest demonstration to date.54

The process began with the revival of the Democratic Coalition. Just days after the general election in November, 1962, a multiracial group of about forty “Democratic

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‘Warhorses’” from the previous year’s coalition assembled in Austin and began talking about the future. Called together by Texas AFL-CIO’s Hank Brown, the leaders discussed the chaos of the several stages of gubernatorial endorsements and campaigns in 1962—failures by various coalition partners to hold true to the robust liberalism that Albert Peña had championed after saving PASO from collapse that fall (see chapter 4). Like the previous incarnation the Coalition, the group decided “against a formal constitution, by-laws, or officers,” but it did appoint a full-time “researcher-writer... to put out the newsletter, carry out the 1963 poll tax program...and perform other research duties as the need arises.” They selected Larry Goodwyn, a former associate editor of the Texas Observer and “Don Yarborough’s press aide,” to fill this post. The activists began sketching plans for the coming two years, outlined a fundraising plan, and named a temporary steering committee that included Albert Peña, Bob Sanchez, Hank Brown and Roy Evans of the Texas AFL-CIO, Latane Lambert (who had coordinated the Bexar County Democratic Coalition’s campaigns in 1962), Arthur DeWitty of the Austin NAACP and Texas Council of Voters, and Bob Hall, the former Ralph Yarborough campaign staffer and labor lawyer from Houston.55

The re-organization of the Coalition proceeded from idea toward reality in January, 1963, when “about 100” members of the former Coalition again assembled at a downtown hotel in Austin. Labor lawyer Chris Dixie of Houston reported that a diverse committee of coalition members had met with Senator Ralph Yarborough “to lodge extremely blunt complaints” about his general failure to respond to the liberals’ needs.

55 Democratic Newsletter, no author [Larry Goodwyn], no date [November 1962], Texas AFL-CIO Democratic Party Correspondence, AR110-26-9-4. Clearly this group began as something separate and new as compared to the Democratic Coalition of 1961-62. The two groups merged in subsequent meetings and perhaps were never separate (or the new one novel) for anyone except the staffer Goodwyn, who was a relatively recent arrival to such meetings.
and especially his poor responsiveness to ethnic Mexican and African American organizations. Texas AFL-CIO president Hank Brown reminded the multiracial group that no single leg of the coalition alone could serve as the “custodian of the public welfare” or the spokesman for real liberalism. Rather, he agreed with Sanchez that only mexicanos should speak for mexicanos, only blacks for blacks, and only organized labor for labor. He called on the “independent” liberals to “put your money where your mouth is or quit,” and he pledged to raise $100 from 100 different “labor men” in order to donate a sum of $10,000 to the Coalition’s operating expenses. The other delegates passed the hat and raised $1,500 in cash and pledged $3,500 more. Countless attendees called for unity and better organizing to coordinate efforts in 1963. Larry Goodwyn, the Coalition’s sole staffer, presented charts that outlined the post-mortem electoral analysis that was also summarized in the Observer (see the introduction to this chapter), and he called on Coalition members to do more to win the black and brown votes. “If we’re gonna get those votes, we’re gonna earn them,” he said. Although “These are our folks,” Goodwyn added, “They ain’t votin’ for us because we ain’t doin’ right by them.”

While he continued to fundraise for the Coalition, Goodwyn also played a key role in bringing the support of the multiracial alliance to Crystal City. As noted above, the statewide Coalition arrived late in Crystal City but provided critical financial support for the final phases of the campaign. Goodwyn himself arrived the afternoon prior to election day, bringing Coalition support but also reporting on the events for the Observer. His lengthy feature on “Los Cinco Candidatos” brought the story of Crystal City to liberal audiences across the state and triggered a debate among white liberals over the

role of anti-Anglo prejudice in the political mobilization of ethnic minorities. Editor
Ronnie Dugger criticized the Teamster-PASO campaign rhetoric and charged
discrimination “in reverse,” while contributor Hart Stilwell and other white liberals
attacked los cinco for not including a single Anglo on their slate. Cornejo maintained
that no Anglos were willing to join them, despite repeated entreaties. Professor George I.
Sanchez blasted Dugger, reminding him that he had “been fighting racism since you were
wearing three cornered pants.” Sanchez reiterated that those who wanted to represent
“mexicanos” must understand their circumstance, “identify with it, and dedicate yourself
to the reforms indicated by that circumstance. If that’s racism, make the most of it.”
Anglos needed to end discrimination if they wanted to avoid future uprisings. “Let
Crystal City be a lesson to other communities in Texas,” Sanchez concluded. “These
people, Negroes or mexicanos, are not cattle but citizens of the United States; with, as the
saying goes, ‘all of the rights and privileges thereunto appertaining.’...How my heart
bleeds for the Crystal City ‘Anglo’ politicians!”

The “revolt” in Crystal City thus energized the Democratic Coalition and
threatened to tear it apart. Perhaps in response to the varied reactions of white
“independent” liberals (along with the negative reaction among conservatives within
PASO), Coalition leaders came together again in April, 1963, and developed a new
leadership structure for the state body. The Coalition of 1961 and ’62 had engendered
non-committal and haphazard meetings of top leaders of labor, PASO, African American
groups, and white liberal Democrats, and each partner was left free to go its own way.

Hart Stilwell, “Another Comment,” Texas Observer, May 16, 1963, 8; George I. Sanchez, “A Re-
editorial supporting the Crystal City and coalition-friendly faction of PASO in its internal controversy that
But the members of the newest Coalition’s temporary steering committee decided it should henceforth be more deliberately democratic, guaranteeing greater representation for black and brown participants and encouraging transparency and unified action. They refrained from creating a constitution and by-laws, but they did appoint officers and create a formal structure. The old, broadly representative but informal agenda and steering committee of about ten members gave way to an official “policy committee” of sixteen leaders, intentionally organized to include four members from each “leg” of the Coalition: labor, ethnic Mexican, African American, and white “independent” liberals. The “Latin-Americans” were represented by Albert Peña, Albert Fuentes, Ramiro Casso (a liberal PASO leader from McAllen in the Valley), and George Sanchez. “Negroes” included W. J. Durham, the president of the Texas Council of Voters (TCV) and a leader of the Dallas NAACP; Francis Williams of the HCCO; Marion Brooks of the Fort Worth NAACP and TCV; and Willie Melton, a litigant in the campaign to defeat the “Jaybird” primary in the 1940s. Labor was represented by the state federation’s Hank Brown; steelworker Ed Ball of Houston; a representative of the building trades from San Antonio; and Doris Cates, director of the state AFL-CIO’s “women’s activities department.” White “independent” liberals included Houston labor lawyer Chris Dixie, Bexar County Coalition leader Herschel Bernard, and two other white women who were Democratic Party activists. 58

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58 Larry Goodwyn, “The Coalition, the Repeal Election, and the Current Poll Tax Drive,” background section appended to Memo from Larry Goodwyn to Co-Chairmen, Democratic Coalition, November 15, 1963, Texas AFL-CIO Democratic Party Correspondence, AR110-26-9-5; Ronnie Dugger, “A Four-Group Coalition,” *Texas Observer*, August 9, 1963, 3-5. The representative of the building trades was Marcus Loftis. The two other white liberals were Lillian Collier from Mumford, president of the state Democratic women’s committee, and Mary Wilson of Dallas. George and Latane Lambert were in the process of moving from San Antonio to Dallas, which may explain her omission from the policy committee. Both of Latane’s primary organizational homes were well represented: Herky Bernard represented the Bexar Coalition and Collier represented the state’s Democratic Women. Latane was listed as the fifth
Each leg also elected one of the four Coalition co-chairs and later appointed seventeen additional members to the Coalition’s full, permanent statewide steering committee—a body of 100 individuals composed of 25 members from each group. A group of 32, eight from each group, eventually comprised the “Executive Committee,” a more manageable but still representative group that provided direction to the co-chairs between the full steering committee meetings. Notable additions to the policy committee included Roy Evans of the UAW and secretary of the Texas AFL-CIO, Ray Shafer and R. G. Miller of the Teamsters, Jack Martin of the San Antonio building trades, Roy Elizondo of Houston PASO, PASO leader and Latin-American Affairs advisor Bob Sanchez, Martin Garcia (representing “Latins”), J. O. “Pepper” Garcia of Dallas PASO, G.J. Sutton and Dr. Ruth Bellinger McCoy of San Antonio, civil rights unionist Moses LeRoy of Houston, Arthur DeWitty of Austin and Franklin Jones of Marshall, a white “independent” who also served as the co-chair from that group.59

This list, in addition to being rather lengthy and cumbersome, indicates the great commitment of Democratic Coalition organizers to building an organization that was unprecedentedly, and intentionally, representative. The careful attention to detail and equal numbers suggested that the Coalition’s leaders were unusually preoccupied with developing rigidly democratic internal practices, a sharp contrast to the ad hoc coalitions of years and decades past. The black and brown civil rights movements, the multiple declarations of independence by PASO and African American leaders throughout the election cycles of 1960 and 1962, and competition from conservative whites all mandated

that liberal whites do more to include other coalition members as full rather than junior partners. Albert Peña and G. J. Sutton had demanded and won a formal voice in Democratic Party affairs back in 1960, and the setbacks of 1962 had not changed their course. Other black and brown activists likewise no longer accepted a back seat to white leaders. All involved accepted George Sanchez’s idiom that each group had to speak for itself. The Democratic Coalition of 1963 provided a structure for that dialogue to take place in the open and on equal terms. While many of the members were holdovers from earlier coalition efforts, this newest incarnation was in this respect a significant innovation that formally recognized—for the first time—the independence and agency of its nonwhite participants.

The new Democratic Coalition’s priorities and modus operandi reflected its egalitarian leadership structure, developing a commitment to civil rights and internal democracy that likewise set it apart from previous attempts at multiracial collaboration. In June, 1963, the Steering Committee of one hundred members met and agreed to a statement of principles “in which they concurred that civil rights is the primary domestic issue,” according to a report in the Observer. They also agreed that “they will not, as a coalition, support any candidate who is opposed by a majority of any one of their four constituent groups...If any one of the coalition’s four ‘legs’ refuses to flex, the coalition stumbles.” The purpose of the Coalition was thus political action in support of the civil rights movements, and any member group could exercise a veto over its actions as a whole.60

60 Dugger, “A Four-Group Coalition,” 3.
The Coalition’s first statewide general assembly in Dallas in mid-July graphically demonstrated the potential power of the new group’s structure and priorities. “About 300 veteran Democrats and liberals turned up” for the gathering, reported Ronnie Dugger. “The four-way division of leadership was symbolized at the front table during the main session: Pena presiding; on his right, Brown, Durham, Brooks, and Ball; on his left, Goodwyn, Dixie, and Fuentes.” This same cast of characters hailed from across the state, flanked by hundreds of additional activists. “Members of the Negro minority were well represented, as they have not been at equivalent conferences in recent years,” Dugger added. The discussion itself was also more open than in previous iterations of the coalition. “For many years Texas liberals treaded softly...on civil rights, evolving integrated practices in their meetings, but generally emphasizing advanced policy positions in other areas,” Dugger noted. Yet the current Coalition was something all together different. The night before the main gathering, forty-five black activists—a group that likely included the iconoclastic B.T. Bonner—caucused in a private session led by Durham, DeWitty, and Sutton. After reviewing African Americans’ “grievances against past liberal coalitions in Texas,” the group discussed the challenge presented by the rise of the UPO. They prepared their own addition to the Coalition’s statement of principles, demanding five key points, some of which were already implicitly satisfied. Dugger paraphrased the first three and directly quoted the final two:

[1.] the Negro must share in the policy-making responsibility of the coalition on the basis of equality; [2.] a Negro candidate must receive the same consideration at the polls as any other candidate endorsed by the coalition; [3.] there would be no secret session with candidates, and no deals, to the exclusion of Negro participation; and:

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61 Ibid, 3-4 (first quotation on 4; all other quotations on 3).
“4. It is the policy of the coalition to support candidates who will work for the enactment of legislation, local, state, and national, which will afford equal opportunities and equal protection of all citizens without reference to race and color in every facet of American life.

“5. The coalition will support no candidate or issue that will place the Negro in the untenable position of accepting or defending tokenism or gradualism as symbolized by the so-called ‘voluntary approach’ to civil rights.”

On the floor of the main Coalition meeting, Dr. Brooks of Fort Worth presented the demands of the black caucus, while attorney W. J. Durham, head of the TCV, “delivered a free-swinging attack on...the U.P.O.... joshing Connally for introducing to Texas a new phenomenon, the conservative Negro.” Durham added that he had “been coalitioning a long time, and had had to leave a coalition after its failure to endorse Henry Gonzalez for governor” in 1958, but he was now “back coalitioning again.” Members of the old DOT winced at his criticism but remained silent, likely recognizing that they could only move forward in the fight for civil rights with the support of the black liberals.62

The debate on the black caucus’s amendment, Dugger argued, “epitomized the willingness of the...conference to face the civil rights issue without flinching.” Immediately after Brooks presented the group’s demands, a liberal district attorney objected that “any implication that any candidate is best qualified” because of his or her race “would be untenable.” Hank Brown offered a friendly amendment that each reference to “Negro” be accompanied by a list of the other three coalition groups, but G. J. Sutton protested that doing so would water down the black activists’ statement, which he thought should be “preserved as a justified set of grievances.” Dugger adds:

He told Brown he couldn’t twist this around. Brown retorted that he might have been guilty of manipulations in the past, as had Brother Sutton, but that at the outset of the coalition, there should not even be a suspicion of

anything devious, and that if his amendment was not acceptable, they should sit down and make it acceptable...

Peña, presiding, called four caucuses in each of the four corners of the meeting chamber—Negroes one corner, Latins another, labor another, independent liberals another. While these caucuses were proceeding, Sutton and Brown agreed that the Negroes’ statement could be filed as originally written in the proceedings, but the statement of the coalition’s principles should apply to all four elements, as in the Brown amendment. But meanwhile the Negro caucus had accepted the Brown amendment, and so...[it] was adopted by the coalition...

Thus, the African Americans’ grievances were openly aired and the remedy debated. Initial enmity and distrust gave way to mutual agreement and a willingness of all parties to adopt the other’s view in order to move forward together.

The Coalition’s “fundamental preliminaries accomplished,” the delegates proceeded to their business. Randolph Blackwell, field director for a voter registration project of the Southern Regional Council based in Atlanta, addressed the multiracial gathering and urged them to stick together. “You must not fail,” he said, and then, turning to Brown, he added that had such a coalition existed, it would have defeated the Taft-Hartley Act, so “Let’s roll the union on.” The message was clear: the coalition needed labor, and labor needed it. The delegates again caucused in their four respective corners and elected the Coalition’s four co-chairs: Peña, Durham, Brown, and Franklin Jones (for the “independent” liberals).

The final, and most important piece of business centered on creating a plan for voter registration and mobilization. The group set their first goals: the passage of the November 9, 1963, referendum to amend the state constitution by abolishing the poll tax, followed by a mass registration drive for the 1964 elections. Then the Coalition members

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
came up with a method for how to get there. It formed a group “devoted wholly” to the campaign and soon chartered it as a non-profit organization, Voters of Texas Enlist (VOTE). Delegates “then agreed to form local coalitions on the same basis of leadership equality in numbers; to work through the women’s activities division of the state labor organization and the Texas state Democratic women’s committees” in order to prepare block walking kits using the county voter registration lists; and “to drum up poll tax [campaign] workers” from white liberal groups, PASO, the TCV, and “Negro and white college students.”65

Following the meeting, the four co-chairs of the new statewide, multiracial, and egalitarian Democratic Coalition announced itself to the Texas press and political establishment. It declared its goal of expanding the franchise and began preparing to do it. Civil rights would come to the Lone Star State, they declared, and it would happen at the ballot box that fall. A new, deliberate foray into democratic organizing had begun.

That evening, many members of the black caucus reassembled as an executive subcommittee of the TCV. Perhaps to ensure that the Coalition actually took up the fight for civil rights, they fired off a telegram to Gov. Connally asking him to “speedup desegregation in Texas” by issuing executive orders “similar to those issued” by Governor Bert Combs of Kentucky and North Carolina’s Governor Terry Sanford. The TCV leaders petitioned Connally to end segregation immediately in state facilities, parks, and hospitals; all businesses operating under a state license; and public employment. “...Every means available to our elected officials should be used,” the telegram read. Democratic Coalition co-chair and TCV president W.J. Durham signed the letter, as did

65 Ibid, 4-5 (first quotation on 4; all others on 5).
Erma and Moses LeRoy and Frances Williams of Houston, Rev. Claude Black and G.J. Sutton of San Antonio, B.T. Bonner of Austin, and two others. The process of “coalitioning,” it seems, had also renewed the bonds within this group of militant black activists, laying the groundwork for the first-ever coordinated statewide civil rights campaign.66

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Meanwhile, in addition to helping to found the coalition, the Texas AFL-CIO extended its own internal commitment to civil rights. As late as August, 1962, delegates to the annual convention of the state federation balked at expanding labor’s role in the black freedom struggle. But less than a year later, labor leaders had set their own course, organizing a new permanent statewide “Committee on Civil Rights and Equal Employment” and publicly assailing Gov. John Connally for his refusal to support the movement. Going out on a precarious limb as far as rank and file union members were concerned, Hank Brown and Roy Evans led labor into the Coalition on one hand and a standoff with the Governor on the other. Rather than retreat, the labor bosses then doubled down and worked to transform the Texas AFL-CIO into a civil rights organization in its own right.

The timid, do-nothing stance of the state labor federation’s convention delegates in 1962 drew sharp criticism from African American activists and white liberals. The annual ad hoc convention Committee on Civil Rights reported out a series of strong resolutions designed to finally end all forms of racial discrimination within organized labor. In addition to six key new paragraphs that attacked “continued anti-Negro

practices in plants and craft unions,” the committee proposed to create “‘permanent machinery’ to investigate and rebuke Texas unions that discriminate against Negroes,” according to a report in the Observer. The convention committee, which included Houston’s Moses LeRoy, would have become permanent and gained a degree of enforcement power, but “moderate integrationists in league with segregationists from locals that still follow Jim Crow practices” defeated the committee’s majority report. Delegates approved a dissenting minority report that reaffirmed the previous platform that had been in place since 1957 and added a few new points hailing “‘better’ social and economic equality,” the removal of race-baiting from statewide political campaigns, and the successful integration of all convention facilities “for the first time” in the merged federation’s history. 67 It also called for “more detailed information,” including “continued compliance with the practice of the [Texas AFL-CIO] Vice-Presidents being required to make written reports of civil rights progress in their area.”68

NAACP regional secretary Clarence Laws of Dallas “criticized the Texas AFL-CIO for not adopting” the stronger resolution, according to a newspaper report, and for failing “to set up a board to study racial discrimination.” Laws told the paper that labor’s continued inaction was “most lamentable” and wrote a letter to Hank Brown calling on labor to do more to support black civil rights. An obviously frustrated Brown replied by noting the state leadership’s various efforts to improve the situation, but Laws maintained that their “commendable efforts” were still not enough. Brown attended the NAACP state convention in San Antonio later that year, joining a panel on “Expanding Job

68 Ibid (Civil Rights Committee Report, AR110-1-13-4).
Opportunities for Minority Groups.” Yet the official policy of organized labor remained gradualist at best at the end of 1962.69

Something changed in 1963. Texas AFL-CIO president Hank Brown and secretary-treasurer Roy Evans had long been outspoken supporters of integration, but they became full-time activists in the struggle. The renewal of a more egalitarian and militant Democratic Coalition likely played a role in their increasingly aggressive stance. Yet the pace of their transformation clearly accelerated on June 11, when President Kennedy intervened to integrate the University of Alabama and that evening gave an iconic speech outlining his views on civil rights and proposing a comprehensive package of new federal legislation on the issue. Just three days later Hank Brown and three hundred state and local labor leaders from across the country went to Washington to join the President for a “special White House Conference on Civil Rights and Equal Employment Opportunity.” Brown reported that following the conference, the national AFL-CIO approved “and adopted for our guidance” a five-step proposal for organized labor to take action in the “increasingly urgent and ever more critical civil rights crisis confronting our country.” State labor federations were urged to create “a working committee to cooperate with the federal government in ending job discrimination”; “rally...support” for the administration’s economic and social legislation; take an active role in local “multi-racial committees” or create them if needed; encourage the advancement of “minority-group union members to positions of leadership and responsibility” within the labor movement; and step up “voter registration drives.” In

69 Miscellaneous clipping provided by the Texas Press Service, July 27, 1962 (first three quotations); Letter from Clarence A. Laws to H.S. Hank Brown, August 14, 1962 (fourth quotation); Letter from Laws to Brown, November 5, 1962, and attached program for the NAACP State Conference (fifth quotation)—all in Texas AFL-CIO, AR110, Correspondence with Non-Union Organizations, Series 25 [hereinafter Texas AFL-CIO Correspondence, AR110-25], Box 8, Folder 4.
short, the national labor movement encouraged state federations to follow the example of its most radical affiliates.\textsuperscript{70}

In Texas, the leaders of the state AFL-CIO moved toward adopting the program that the Fort Worth Packinghouse Workers had put into place nearly a decade earlier. Yet it was less a complete departure than a new excuse for leaders like Brown to move faster than their stolid convention delegates had previously permitted. In fact, when Brown wrote to local central labor councils and affiliated unions to urge them to join the new “working committee,” he noted that “We are already involved, of course, in many of these proposals—but in an informal and uncoordinated way.” The national AFL-CIO has now suggested that the Texas federation plan and coordinate their activities, and that it do so in a “swift and meaningful” manner. “Of course, there will be thorny problems to solve,” Brown added. “But solve them we must—for the good not only of the state and the nation, but for the future of the labor movement as well.”\textsuperscript{71}

Brown called together approximately thirty-five union representatives from across the state for the committee’s organizational meeting. The meeting occurred on July 17 in Austin—three days after the conclusion of the Democratic Coalition convention in Dallas. Reporters from the \textit{Houston Chronicle} and \textit{Post}, the \textit{Dallas News}, the \textit{San Antonio Express}, AP and UPI wire services, KTBC in Austin, and CBS News looked on, forming a group that would have constituted an unusually large press corps for an annual statewide convention let alone a single committee meeting.\textsuperscript{72}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{70} Form letter from H.S. Hank Brown to appointees of the Committee on Civil Rights and Equal Employment, Texas AFL-CIO Executive Board Records, AR110-1-13-4, 1.
\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.}, 1-2.
\textsuperscript{72} List of participants, Civil Rights Committee Meeting (Organizational), July 17, 1963, Texas AFL-CIO Executive Board Records, AR110-1-13-4.
\end{footnotesize}
The committee included a diverse range of participants, from longtime civil rights unionists to the most conservative members of all-white craft unions. Those that leaned toward the former group dominated the meeting, thanks to the unprecedentedly interventionist support of Brown, Evans, and the national AFL-CIO. Frank Wallace of the Fort Worth Packinghouse Workers, J. E. “Jimmy” Middleton of the Houston Laborers Local #18, and George Lambert of the ILGWU were among those that advocated for aggressive action to support civil rights. The representatives of the steelworkers and communications workers likely joined them, while leaders of the UAW and the oil workers probably joined the representatives of the building trades in advocating gradualism and moderation in labor’s formal public statements on the issue.

Such gradualism can be attributed both to the Southern racial attitudes that dominated the period and to pragmatic calculations by white union leaders who sought to avoid a backlash within their membership. A pair of letters addressing the committee offers a window into the gradualists’ way of thinking about the issue. In one, Allan Maley of the Dallas AFL-CIO Council accepted Brown’s appointment to serve on the committee, but he did so only “after thinking the thing over.” It was “something of a hot potato, here at least,” he added. Maley also reported that the local council had met to consider a draft version of the committee’s equal employment opportunity program. “It was the board’s feeling that we would be better off at this time without any public statements,” he wrote. “They also felt, and I agree, that AFL-CIO policy concerning discrimination is clear, and we are bound by that policy. Therefore, there is not much question of where we stand officially on the President’s program.” The council board also agreed to cooperate with a representative of the PCEEO when he visited Dallas, but
that they wished to do so “without publicity.” Private advocacy was all that Dallas labor leaders thought they could manage without causing a revolt in their ranks. “The feeling was that a public announcement in advance would subject some of our leaders to heavy pressure from their radicals,” a group that may have included both civil rights unionists and white supremacist reactionaries.73

The second letter, written by an anonymous member of the oil workers along the Gulf Coast but passed along after the committee meeting by local president Harry Hubbard, painted a similar picture. Our locals have long been integrated, the anonymous author began, and we do not practice or condone discrimination. Yet “recent efforts of the various Negro organizations, using political and pressure tactics, have created a new resentment among the whites unequaled since reconstruction days.” When labor leaders take public positions in support of civil rights, “we suffer a loss of strength sorely needed for collective bargaining and political action...[and] we jeopardize our security and growth by a too aggressive pursuance of our Civil Rights policy.” African Americans already have their civil rights organizations, he added, and they go so far as to decertify our unions to win their demands. As a result, “there is widespread discontent in this Local and others...over-emphasis on Negro rights will surely result in decreased C.O.P.E. contributions, less political effectiveness, adversely affect collect bargaining and make organizing in the South practically impossible.” He concluded that the union’s very survival was at stake, “so must we now stop wasting our...strength on this one single issue...”74

Hank Brown’s leadership notwithstanding, the outcome of the Civil Rights committee’s founding meeting on July 18 was far from a foregone conclusion. Rodger Coyne of the U.S. Department of Labor set the tone for the gathering in his opening address, one geared primarily toward the representatives from the craft unions. “The Negro suffers,” he said, “because of his skin. But he also suffers because often he is an unskilled worker in a society that has not found the way to full employment.” Still, it was not enough to wait for black workers “to come knock on the door and ask to be let in,” he added. Instead, “You must go out and find them and bring them into the apprenticeship program...We have to... go to the minorities with open arms and tell them we’re here to help.” H. A. Moon of the UAW, an industrial union, replied that the companies his union represented simply refused to hire black workers “in the skills.” He added, “Make the companies hire ‘em, and we’ll take ‘em in.” George Lambert agreed that employers were often to blame for discrimination in hiring. He asked that more be done to create equal employment opportunities in the private sector, including among firms that do not contract with the federal government. Lambert, the longtime organizer for the garment workers, knew all too well that his union members were all women and often women of color, but that management remained the domain of white men. Carmen Lucia, an Italian-American woman organizer for the ILGWU, joined him on the committee.\footnote{Ibid; “Texas Labor Leaders Blame Employers for Bias on Jobs,” Dallas Morning News, July 18, 1963 (all quotations); Minutes, Texas AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee, July 17, 1963, Texas AFL-CIO Executive Board Records, AR110-1-13-4.}

Brown presented the national AFL-CIO’s proposed program to the committee, and despite some members’ objections, the more militant civil rights activists in the group carried the day. In the end, the committee unanimously passed a “Statement of
Policy” that included a long list of demands—a set of resolutions for immediate integration that far exceeded anything the Texas labor movement had ever considered. They endorsed the Kennedy Administration’s civil rights program, but most of the document centered on internal union affairs and state politics. They called upon all affiliated unions to accept all members without discrimination, to remove racial identifiers from lists in hiring halls, to make all referral services colorblind, to end discrimination in apprenticeship programs, and to “make certain that the seniority clauses of their agreements are not discriminatory...[nor] applied in a discriminatory manner.”

Perhaps responding to Moon and Lambert, they added a note that employers should likewise urge their associations to ban employment discrimination based on race or national origin.

The document then takes a radical turn, demanding “the State of Texas to act officially in the total civil rights field.” Racial discrimination was “but one of the discrimination evils present in Texas society,” the statement continued. Discrimination based on age, sex, and union membership also prevailed. The State must address the all of these areas. The final list of demands was startlingly comprehensive: pass a minimum wage law of $1.25 per hour “so that economic bondage ceases to keep 1,500,000 Texans in serfdom”; pass a law to guarantee equal pay for equal work “so that sex ceases to be a basis for inequality”; guarantee workers the right to bargain collectively; pass a law “officially outlawing race, creed, color, or national origins as a basis for employment by the state or its political subdivisions”; join the Texas AFL-CIO’s lawsuit against the “border commuter” problem; and repeal “all laws...which favor one class of citizens over another.” The committee saved the best for last:
Texas AFL-CIO several weeks ago wrote Gov. John Connally and suggested he appoint a statewide multi-racial committee to work with regional and local organizations of all kinds interested in abolishing discriminations in Texas. We reiterate that suggestion.

We believe these matters are of such urgency that a special session of the 58th Legislature should be summoned to deal with them – and we ask the Governor of Texas to call such a special session at once.76

The state’s labor movement, which had failed to make progress in fighting Jim Crow when it adopted a do-nothing policy less than a year earlier, had done a complete about-face, demanding that the Governor call a special session of the legislature to address “the total civil rights field.” Labor’s bold demand made headlines across the state, but Connally’s office initially had no comment. The Governor had already planned a press conference to address the civil rights issue on the afternoon of Thursday, July 18—the day after the Civil Rights Committee meeting in Austin. His staff indicated that he would also respond to labor at that time.77

The standoff between labor and the governor then took a curious turn. Connally deflected attention from the call for a special session by highlighting and taking out of context a single statement made by secretary-treasurer Roy Evans during the civil rights committee meeting. The statement was so insignificant that it did not appear in the meeting minutes, nor did it merit headlines in initial newspaper reports on the gathering. During a discussion of the “commuter” system and what he termed the “deplorable” wages and working conditions along the border, Evans told the committee that “there may be a need for demonstrations down there.” A small, four-paragraph United Press

International wire report buried deep inside one newspaper carried Evans’ comments, while two short paragraphs in a much-larger, page five story on the committee meeting appeared in another publication. Evans added that he had met with Fidel Velasquez of Nuevo Laredo, head of the Mexican labor movement across the border, and that Velasquez had agreed to cooperate in the demonstrations. Evans believed the protests would also improve relationships with Mexican workers on the other side of Rio Grande. The “commuter” and border issues were included in the “Statement of Policy” that came out of the committee meeting, but the oblique call for “demonstrations” and bi-national labor collaboration both remained absent.  

Still, Connally jumped on Evans’ comments to launch a counter-offensive against labor from his bully pulpit. At his scheduled press conference, the Governor announced that he would give a televised speech on civil rights the following evening. But he first used the platform to lay into Evans and the state’s labor leadership, accusing them of “trying to inflame racial issues in Texas,” in the words of one newspaper report. The Governor pandered to white Texans’ fear of disorder and attempted to separate union members from their unscrupulous leaders:

I will leave [to] the judgment of thinking Texans the irresponsible actions of Roy Evans... [The statement] encouraged racial demonstrations in Texas at a time when all citizens of good will are striving quietly and earnestly to avoid the unrest and disorder that have troubled less harmonious states. For months, Texas has made remarkable progress in civil rights because dedicated men in communities throughout the state have met the challenge in the Texas way—without coercion or compulsion...

I believe the rank and file members of organized labor, as well as Texans in general, will deplore the fact that Roy Evans and his AFL-CIO

78 Ford, “AFL-CIO Urges Special Session” (first and second quotations; statements on Velasquez); “Labor Threatens Demonstrations for Higher Pay,” clipping of UPI report in unknown paper, dated July 18, 1963 (third quotation), Texas AFL-CIO MAAC. AR110-7-4-1.
propagandists have now chosen to attempt to inflame this issue for purely personal selfish gain. Should any racial unrest or crisis now develop in Texas, the officials of the state AFL-CIO must take full credit.\textsuperscript{79}

Evans replied that the Governor was “misinformed as to exactly what I said.” During the discussion on the border, Evans maintained, he had proposed that they first hold a conference of “responsible representatives” of the U.S. and Mexican labor movements, “business interests and government agencies to try to resolve the miserable situation that exists along the border.” If the conference failed, then “it might be that a series of demonstrations would be productive.” Queried a few days later about the exact tactics that he was advocating, Evans noted that he intended “peaceful and non-violent” action—“such things like the Boston Tea Party, strikes and sit-ins,” he said.\textsuperscript{80}

Despite Evans’s clarifications, Connally had successfully shifted the media focus from labor’s call for a special session on civil rights to the state AFL-CIO’s “irresponsible” leadership and the threat of disorder among ethnic Mexicans in the border region. That Friday, July 19, at 9:30 p.m., the Governor made his televised speech on civil rights. He did so, he had said, because it was “a serious problem” that required leadership from his office, and because the people were “entitled” to learn his views prior to his participation in the upcoming National Governors’ Conference. In his address, Connally urged patience and voluntary progress, calling for “persuasion and cooperation, not passion or compulsion.” He said he opposed the President and Attorney General’s bill that mandated integration as it applied to private businesses and associations, arguing


\textsuperscript{80} “Connally to Talk On Rights Today” (first four quotations); Mike Raburn, “Battle Lines Drawn for Civil Rights Showdown in Texas,” Brownsville Herald, July 21, 1963, 12-A, clipping in Texas AFL-CIO MAAC, AR110-7-4-1.
that it infringed upon the property rights of individuals. He added that discrimination should be ended in all public, state-owned establishments, and that he would do “everything within my power” to ensure equal treatment for African Americans, including access to voting rights, quality public education, and equal economic opportunity. One report noted that “Initial response to the speech,” presumably among whites, “was encouraging.”

Other members of the Democratic Coalition rallied to Evans’s defense and assailed the Governor’s position. The day before the speech, Albert Peña, acting as PASO’s state-chairman, joined labor’s call for a special session on civil rights. He called on the legislature to “end all segregation in public places” and asked the Governor to follow “the positive leadership of President John F. Kennedy.” Peña sent a telegram to Connally’s office that he then presented to the newspapers. It included a demand for “fair employment legislation to insure [sic] equal job opportunities for Latin Americans and Negroes...I sincerely believe such action by you would prove to the world that Texas is ready to step into the 20th Century,” Peña concluded. A day after the speech, Clarence Laws of the NAACP blasted Connally’s stance on the issue. He said that the Governor’s position was “no more palatable” than those of the arch-segregationist leaders of Mississippi and Alabama. “Connally’s pious, sugar-coated platitudes” were simply unacceptable, Laws added. “He would leave [integration] up to the pleasures of those who have a long history of exploitation of minorities.” Perhaps reacting to Connally’s fear mongering in regards to South Texas, Laws cautiously noted that the group preferred

\[81\] “Connally to Talk On Rights Today” (first and second quotations); Jon Ford, “Connally’s Rights View Low-Rated,” San Antonio Express-News, August 4, 1963 (all other quotations); “Connally’s Distinction on Rights A Valid One,” clipping of editorial in unknown publication, dated July 19, 1963—all in Texas AFL-CIO MAAC. AR110-7-4-1.
to gain civil rights without demonstrations, but direct action might be necessary. “If we think demonstrations will help...Then we’ll demonstrate,” Laws concluded.82

In contrast, the UPO, the conservative African American group, praised Connally’s speech and rallied to defend the Governor. The address represented “the most significant and positive statement on civil rights by a public official in the history of the state,” the group declared. It called on the state’s two U.S. Senators to make their views known, particularly hoping to “smoke out” Ralph Yarborough, who had remained relatively quiet on the subject. Still, even the UPO disagreed with the Governor in regards to privately-owned public accommodations. As one reporter put it, opposing any part of Kennedy’s program was tantamount to political suicide for any “Negro who aspires to racial leadership...in these stormy times.”83

“Battle Lines Drawn For Civil Rights Showdown In Texas,” read the headline of a July 21 article in the Brownsville Herald. Evans, labor, Peña, PASO, the NAACP, the TCV, and the Coalition all stood on one side, while the Governor, the UPO, and the state’s conservative political and economic elites stood on the other. The Texas AFL-CIO had created a permanent civil rights committee and adopted positions that were unimaginable less than a year earlier. The other Coalition members had joined labor in demanding concrete action, while the Governor had deflected their entreaties through a combination of “pious platitudes” and a creative counter-offensive designed to discredit labor’s leaders in the eyes of their own members and the general public. Connally took a position that “certainly would have been considered liberal by the standards of a few

82 “PASO Asks Session on Race Issue,” clipping of UPI report in unknown publication, dated July 19, 1963 (all Peña quotations); “Connally Talk Hit By NAACP,” clipping of UPI report in unknown publication, n.d. [probably July 20, 1963] (all Laws quotations)—both in Texas AFL-CIO MAAC, AR110-7-4-1; Raburn, “Battle Lines Drawn.”
83 Ford, “Connally’s Rights View Low-Rated.”
months ago, if not today,” according to one contemporary journalist. Yet the Governor’s own allies struggled to defend him as the state’s increasingly militant African Americans, ethnic Mexicans and white liberals and labor leaders all called for immediate change.  

As the skies grew heavy with a gathering storm on the horizon, the leaders of Texas AFL-CIO had two choices as to how they might respond. They could fold or double-down. They chose the latter course, and PASO, black activists, and the Democratic Coalition all joined them in pushing the state even further toward becoming a democracy.

* * *

As the Texas AFL-CIO began making its plans for the future, B. T. Bonner decided that he had waited long enough. The iconoclastic activist, who staged a one-man hunger strike to protest theater segregation in 1961, had recently joined with other TCV leaders after the Democratic Coalition meeting in sending Gov. Connally a petition demanding that he issue executive orders to speed up desegregation in Texas. Connally’s speech on July 19 had stopped far short of that. Ten days later, around 10:30 in the morning, Bonner entered the reception area of the Governor’s office inside the capitol. He asked for a meeting with Connally but was informed that the chief executive was in Houston for the day. He asked for an appointment and was refused. Then he sat down in a chair in the lobby and declared that he would wait until Connally returned. That evening, he took a break from his one man sit-in to join a group of “More than 50 white and Negro pickets” for a march outside the Governor’s mansion. The pickets, which included twenty students from the predominately white University of Texas, protested

84 Ibid.
Connally’s “moderate position” on integration, according to a newspaper report. The group circled the mansion and then made their way to a rally on the steps of the capitol. Bonner led the parade and carried a sign reading “Freedom, All Here, Now.” Other protestors distributed handbills charging that “Texas now has a Jim Crow governor of the worst kind” and calling Connally a “segregationist.” Then Bonner re-entered the building and resumed his sit-in in the foyer of the Governor’s office. Around 11:00 p.m., the Capitol guards closed the lobby and moved Bonner downstairs into the main rotunda. They stowed away the benches and other furniture, but Bonner remained, catching a few hours of sleep on the terrazzo tile floor. The next morning he went back upstairs and again parked himself in a soft chair outside Connally’s office, where he struggled to stay awake as he continued to wait. One observer told a reporter that Bonner had not eaten since he arrived. Finally, that afternoon, after twenty-seven hours, he was given an audience to see the Governor a week later. He left the capitol triumphantly, smiling for the newspaper cameras while flashing a large piece of paper confirming his appointment. Still, Bonner promised to continue the demonstrations, and a small group picketed the mansion again that evening. Bonner added that he had an eight-point set of civil rights proposals to present to the Governor, but he would not reveal the specifics to the press.85

With this simple act, B.T. Bonner reignited the black civil rights movement in Texas. He also brought tremendous pressure upon Connally, whose speech ten days earlier had temporarily quieted if not silenced his critics. Bonner’s rogue sit-in had immediate political implications, especially in regards to the ongoing debate between the

more militant and conservative factions of African American leaders. Journalists were preoccupied with Bonner’s ambiguous class status, self-styled radicalism, and criticism of traditional black leaders. A “college-educated Negro waiter,” in the words of several reports, Bonner was “tied by the bonds of race and circumstance to the table waiter’s trade” but was nonetheless “urbane and intelligent” and “highly-articulate.” He declared that he represented no organization, considered himself well to the left of the NAACP, and had nothing but disdain for the UPO.

“Putting the heat on Connally [was] incidental to both” of his “two primary objectives,” wrote columnist Jon Ford of the San Antonio Express. First, he hoped to rally his “ultra liberal group” to show that Texas supported the federal civil rights legislation, and second, he was “aflame with the idea of breaking up existing political power centers among members of his own race.” Bonner, who had unsuccessfully sought a seat on the city council a few months earlier, attacked the conservative black leaders of Austin, led by the UPO’s statewide president, M. J. Waters. “They use ruthless methods to try and kill off ambition,” Bonner said. “Everything they advocate is a form of gradualism that has failed in the past. They favor negotiations and compromise... When the meetings are over, the white man turns into the private club and the Negro heads for the elevator. I’m not interested in negotiating privately until they are ready to drink with me in public.” The traditional leaders replied by criticizing Bonner. “This is one of the best cities I have seen for fine feeling between the races,” said Dr. J. J. Seabrook, president of Huston-Tillotson College, the city’s historically-black school. “This fellow Bonner is looking for sensation and publicity... If this keeps up, he could get out of town people in here and whip this thing into a frenzy,” he warned. Ford summarized the
conflict: “The hassle began to resemble a kind of political tong war in which an emergent liberal group seeks to wrestle power from the hands of moderates.”

Bonner’s sit-in, then, was the work of a “lone wolf,” but it also reflected the deep-seated and growing tension between African American liberals of the TCV and the Democratic Coalition and the relatively conservative black elites and members of the UPO. Bonner did not wait for the endorsement of any group to bring his “ultra liberal” group of college students and Austin activists to the capitol, but he certainly advanced the agenda of the more liberal groups. In fact, he had clear ties to the TCV and had already made plans to have several other officers from around the state attend his parlay with the Governor. The group also began preparing for a mass demonstration to take place in Austin on August 28—coinciding with the much larger, but distant, March on Washington.

In the meantime, Bonner did not have to wait long to experience the fallout from his direct action protest. On July 31, the day after the conclusion of his sit-in, Bonner’s employer, the “swank” Club Caravan at the Villa Capri motel in Austin, weighed in by firing him, though a manager claimed that the discharge had “nothing to do with Bonner’s integration activities.” Apparently the club was not yet ready to have the “Negro waiter” sit down and drink with its elite white patrons.

* * *

Just before the founding meeting of its new Civil Rights Committee, the Texas AFL-CIO helped create a thirty-minute television program called “Civil Rights in Texas.” In it the state federation’s director of public relations, Lyman Jones, moderated a
discussion of three distinguished panelists: Austin newsman and NAACP leader Arthur DeWitty, professor and activist George Sanchez, and Roy Evans. They made the film available on tape and set up more than a dozen screenings on local networks across the state, including two dates in Austin, and one each in Beaumont, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio, Laredo, and Weslaco (in the Lower Rio Grande Valley)—all in July and early August, 1963.  

The federation’s selection of this trio and its timing and distribution plan reflected organized labor’s understanding of what “Civil Rights in Texas” meant. It was a multiracial issue that included both the black and brown struggles and in which organized labor could play a key role. It encompassed the cities as well as rural areas and stretched from the border to the panhandle. In order to reach its members across the state, labor literally took its show on the road. By present-day standards it is a crude way to get one’s message out, but at the time it represented a significant commitment of financial and human resources. In short, it was clear that the leaders of the Texas AFL-CIO were not content to hold committee meetings and participate in the Democratic Coalition but also wanted an on-the-ground presence in the multiracial civil rights struggle.

In the tumultuous months of the summer of 1963, organized labor responded to the Governor’s attacks by launching an all-out campaign to improve working conditions along the U.S.-Mexico border. As Evans had promised, it invited employers and local officials to a “Border Wage & Job Conference” in Laredo and then launched demonstrations after the decision-makers boycotted the parlay. The events captured the

88 Form letter from Hank Brown to unknown, August 5, 1963, Texas AFL-CIO Executive Board Records, AR110-1-13-4; Minutes of Civil Rights Committee Meeting (Organizational).
attention of the state’s newspapers and heralded the beginning of a sustained commitment by the state federation to community, political, and union organizing in the region.

The Texas AFL-CIO also supported the state’s revived black civil rights movement as African American activists called on the Governor and local politicians to support Kennedy’s legislation and pass similar laws at the state and municipal level.

But despite the militant resolutions of labor’s Civil Rights Committee, the ethnic Mexican struggle became its priority. It is unclear why labor leaders made the switch in emphasis from black to brown. It may have begun with not wanting to back down in the face of Connally’s attacks. Moreover, the Teamsters had been flirting with organizing farmworkers in the Valley, and at least one AFL-CIO affiliate union had begun to aggressively organize the area’s industrial workers. Labor certainly saw the border region as an area for potential membership growth, but leaders also recognized that it would take years to overcome the extreme hostility toward unionism among the area’s political and economic elites—and the resulting fear among unorganized workers. South Texas had long been critical to the labor movement’s political goals of building a liberal Democratic majority in the state, and labor had recently developed key political allies there through the Coalition and PASO, which itself had become a sort of labor organization. Certainly there were more likely community activists with which to partner there than in rural East Texas, where the black civil rights movement was all but stillborn. And there were not many white members in the Valley who would attack labor’s civil rights initiatives from within, as they were already doing in the big cities. Labor also had a loose organizational infrastructure in the Valley thanks to the Latin American Affairs Committee, which began with a lone advisor in the late 1940s, was
carried forward by Bob Sanchez in the 1950s, and became permanent in 1961, when the state federation filed the “commuter” lawsuit.89

For all of these reasons, then, the Texas AFL-CIO took its stand in Laredo, not in East Texas or in one of the big cities. In an ironic twist, just as the black civil rights movement was descending upon Austin, Brown and Evans went to the Valley. The labor leaders continued to support the black civil rights movement, but their focus was clearly elsewhere.

* * *

On Saturday, August 3, over three hundred union members, PASO activists, and residents of Laredo gathered in that city’s Jarvis Plaza in the mid-afternoon, braving 103-degree heat to hear the reports from the Texas AFL-CIO’s Border Wage and Job Conference. The previous day, members of the state federation’s permanent Committee on Latin American Affairs had come together in a nearby hotel to discuss the “deplorable” wages and working conditions of the mostly ethnic Mexican labor force along the Rio Grande. On Saturday morning, PASO leaders from across South Texas joined them, as did representatives of state and federal government agencies as well as a handful of local merchants and several officials of the CTM, Mexico’s official labor movement. Dan Rather and a national crew from CBS News, along with other reporters, looked on as the main session of the conference got underway in a downtown auditorium. And then in the afternoon, outside in the square named for a Confederate hero,

Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez gave an hour-long speech attacking the region’s farmers and industrialists and highlighting the plight of the poor. Several other political and labor leaders also addressed the crowd, which, despite the heat and the sun beating down, frequently interrupted the speakers with raucous applause.\textsuperscript{90}

In the weeks leading up to the Laredo gathering, labor leaders Roy Evans and Hank Brown had to act fast. Responding to Governor Connally’s personal attacks in front of the state’s media, they decided to transform a regular meeting of the Latin American Affairs Committee into the opening salvo of their campaign to organize the Valley. They called a conference of all parties who contributed to or were affected by the region’s low wage scale to address the issue, in their words, “by cooperation and common sense, and if this does not work, by demonstrations.” The latter method had been the subject of the Governor’s ire, who told the state that blood would be on their hands if the protests were to turn violent. The Border Wage and Job Conference was their antidote—a creative combination of the negotiations and civility that Connally advocated along with a set-piece rally that would showcase labor’s power to mobilize in the streets while stopping short of the kind of unruly “demonstration” that the Governor feared. And it would all take place in the front of a salivating press corps.\textsuperscript{91}

Predictably, the leading business interests in the region refused to walk into their trap, attacking the conference in the press before it even got underway. One ostensibly neutral report noted that “Labor union officials from both sides of the Rio Grande sit down...to air the dirty linen of Texas employers along the Texas-Mexico border.” A few small farmers and merchants had agreed to participate, the report added, but

\textsuperscript{90} Central Labor Council of Webb County, AFL-CIO, Memorandum on the Border Wage and Job Conference, August 2-3, 1963, Texas AFL-CIO MAAC, AR110-7-1-1.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
representatives of “large organizations of businessmen and growers” had remained silent on whether they would attend. One spokesman for a local chamber of commerce went on record to say that Evans was “just trying to stir up something,” and that labor leaders were “making a mountain out of a molehill.” Another business interest, an attorney for “several of the Valley’s largest employers” named Scott Toothacher, added, “They just don’t know what the situation is here.”

Evans shrugged off such comments and spoke candidly about the larger political stakes of the conference. “We hope that everyone will agree on the nature of the [wage] problem and reach areas of agreement,” he told a reporter. But “if the meeting is boycotted by businessmen, we will present an alternate plan for mass demonstrations.”

The day before the full conference began, he addressed a gathering of the Webb County Central Labor Council in Laredo, and that evening he went on television there to state his case for the conference. Evans “sharply criticized 90 per cent of Texas management, Gov. Connally, and U.S. Rep. Joe Kilgore who represents the [Lower Valley],” wrote one reporter. Addressing his union brothers, he responded to criticism that labor merely wanted conflict. “They say we are trying to inflame the people,” he said. “You’re damn right. We’re trying to inflame the people—against injustice. We think this is the time for demonstrations in spite of what the governor says.” That evening on television, Evans noted that Laredo was “the poorest city in the United States,” with abnormally high unemployment and more than half of its residents living in poverty. But a “political revolution is coming” along the border, he said. “Things are happening in this area...” as “the new, young leadership” of labor and PASO were demanding accountability from the

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region’s elected officials. Evans added that although the conference was not a political meeting, labor would try “to seek these rights through political activity and...raise wages through various types of demonstrations.”

On Friday, August 2, the Latin-American Affairs Committee convened in Laredo’s Plaza Hotel. As it had in the past, much of the discussion centered on the ongoing “commuter problem,” but such conversation was now accompanied by a new sense of urgency and militancy among committee members as well as a more comprehensive plan for the future. Hank Brown reported that the federal suit was dismissed but was now on appeal and would be taken to the Supreme Court if necessary. At the same time, he added that the federation is asking the Kennedy administration to establish a $1.25 per hour minimum wage for commuters by executive order. While Mexican union leaders from south of the river looked on, Brown explained that the new wage, which far exceeded the prevailing rate on the Texas side of the border, would force employers to hire domestic laborers instead.

Yet for the first time, the committee moved beyond the lawsuit and administrative diplomacy toward a plan for direct action protest and increased on-the-ground organizing. Franklin Garcia, who had been stationed on the border as an organizer for the Meat Cutters since 1961, said that he was unhappy with the “progress made by the union,” the committee, and “the President’s civil rights program,” according to a report. “I want more and I want to move faster,” Garcia said. “I want to eliminate the word mañana.”

The committee’s co-chairman, steelworkers’ representative Paul Montemayor of Corpus

93 Griffin, “Laredo Union Parley” (first and second quotations); David Lopez, “Aide Says Unions To Demonstrate,” Corpus Christi Caller, August 2, 1963, clipping in Texas AFL-CIO MAAC, AR110-7-4-1.

Christi agreed: “I hope we have demonstrations...The Lord knows they are long overdue,” he said. A national AFL-CIO official claimed that the economic situation along the border was worse than it had been twenty years earlier, and Hank Brown noted that “The only way workers in this area are going to have economic justice is to be like hornets—get in a nest and organize.” J. H. “Henry” Villareal, the secretary of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Central Labor Council, announced that he had recently been hired by the state federation to do public relations in his area, with the aim of educating citizens on the idea of unionism and independent political action. Brown added that the trial project’s goal was not to “organize the workers overnight” but to invest long-term in improving the condition of ordinary people in the area. “If the job can be done without labor organizing we certainly will support it,” he said. “Our immediate objective is not to organize, but to educate.”

The public phase of the conference took place on Saturday, August 3. As expected, the Valley’s leading businessmen boycotted the parley, but a few merchants and small farmers did join the approximately one hundred union and PASO members who gathered to discuss the region’s low wages and poor working conditions. At least a half-dozen media outlets, including CBS News and the UPI looked on, as did veteran activists George and Latane Lambert, who had made the trip from Dallas solely to observe the momentous event. J. Ed Lyles of the Texas Employment Commission, whose reappointment the Texas AFL-CIO had vehemently opposed, surprised observers when he endorsed a their call for a $1.25 state minimum wage law—making him the highest ranking official in Texas government to do so. Yet “Not a single representative

of business came forward to speak for management” during the Saturday morning panel discussion.96

Albert Peña closed the morning session with a characteristically electrifying speech in which he linked the border organizing campaign to the broader, multiracial struggles for civil rights and independent political power. He again claimed that civil rights was the most important issue facing the state and nation, “especially in the field of fair employment practices and wages and hours.” Peña added that it was not just a “moral problem” but also a “meat and potatoes” issue, and only strong legislation could fix the problem. He attacked the Governor’s program directly: “I cannot buy the sugar-coated, so-called moderate approach to civil rights,” he said. Such sentiments were segregation in disguise and emphasized “order” over “justice.” If Connally truly believes in voluntary integration, Peña added, he should immediately issue executive orders that would end all discrimination related to the state. There was only one solution, Peña concluded: “We have to join, if we haven’t already, the old-fashioned political revolt developing all over the state of Texas...[which was] started by independent-thinking Mexican-Americans who insist that they be recognized as an integral part of the political community...” And the way to do it was to join the Democratic Coalition in registering 200,000 more ethnic Mexican voters to vote in 1964.97

Finally, on Saturday afternoon, Henry B. Gonzalez and Hank Brown led the list of speakers at the rally at Jarvis Plaza. Prior to the conference, the local Central Labor

97 “Pena Urges Drive To Register Voters”; “Pena Lashes Gov. Connally,” San Antonio Express, August 4, 1963, clipping in SAPL-VF. The period for registering voters for the November 9, 1963, constitutional referenda election had ended on January 31, but registration for the following year would begin immediately afterward.
Council of Webb County had worked to invite ordinary Laredo citizens to attend the rally, promising that it would a “large public meeting” in which the “results” of the multipartite conference would be announced. Circulating an “invitation to the public” written in Spanish, local organizers highlighted the presence of Gonzalez, “a true friend of all of the citizens of our town” and an honorable representative in Washington.

“Citizens, don’t miss” it, the flyer concluded. But once again the Valley’s political elites foiled the labor leaders’ plans. Roy Evans claimed that “the local political machine,” presumably including area businessmen, had put pressure on local citizens (or employees) to keep them away from the public rally. “We have the facts and they don’t want to face up to them,” Evans added, referring to the region’s business leaders.98

Some three hundred people, mostly rank and file union members, ended up attending the rally, where Brown reported on the “results” of the conference and Gonzalez rambled endlessly against the bracero program. Since businessman had boycotted the meeting, Brown laid out the program approved by labor’s Latin American Affairs Committee the previous day. Most significantly, it called for a new annual appropriation of $30,000 to hire a full-time public relations officer in each of three Valley cities in order to begin to crack the wall of opposition to unionism and independent political action that dominated the region. Gonzalez, who had helped kill the renewal of the bracero program in Congress a few months earlier, still railed against the system of “slave labor” that depressed wages in the Valley. He also hit the “commuter” program and paused to thank organized labor for taking an interest in the area’s plight. He was

“highly complementary” of the Texas AFL-CIO, according to one report. “He asked if the AFL-CIO wasn’t speaking up for the poor, who would?”

The Border Wage and Job Conference thus ended much as it had begun: as a gathering of allies coming together to take on an impossible task in the face of intransigent opposition. It did not result in new jobs, or even new dialogue with the Valley’s elites. It did not produce unruly demonstrations, and even the planned rally likely fell short of its organizers’ expectations.

But it did shine new light on what had previously been an unspoken and unacknowledged truth in Texas political life. It was a “demonstration” of another type: one that showcased the extreme poverty of the border region, the area’s intractable local machine, and the full meaning of “civil rights” as it applied to ethnic Mexicans.

Franklin Garcia, the Meat Cutters’ organizer, had introduced a resolution Saturday morning that called for state and federal action “to prohibit employers from intimidating, coercing, discriminating against, or firing, employes [sic] for political activities.” The attendees approved the measure, which got the root of the problem. If the conference and rally were any indication, labor had underestimated just how fiercely employers were going to fight to prevent change from sweeping the region. The fact that “big labor” could only hire “public relations” officers and that their first assignment was “not to organize, but to educate,” underscored just how much work remained to be done.

But the arrival of labor in the Valley meant that someone cared, that the statewide coalition’s most powerful leg had committed itself to joining the “old-fashioned political

100 Banks, “Businessmen Shun Parley.”
revolt” led by “independent-minded” ethnic Mexicans. Brown maintained that they would be there for the long haul: “We are prepared to work so long as there is any hope for a better tomorrow for these people.”

Back in Austin, other members of the Coalition continued to step up the pressure on the Governor. B. T. Bonner and his small group of Austin “ultra liberals” led the charge, but he was also joined by a number of other Coalition activists, first from San Antonio and then from Dallas and Houston. Thanks to his sit-in, Bonner had won an appointment with Connally, but the planned meeting never took place. Instead the war of words and political maneuvering continued, culminating in the state’s largest civil rights demonstration to date. Both the final march and the organizing along the way highlight the ongoing vibrancy and importance of multiracial collaboration.

The political stakes were again clear on August 1, when three groups each made their stances on integration known in separate events in Austin. B. T. Bonner, who had been fired from his job the previous day, led a group of seven pickets—five white, two black—who again assembled outside the Governor’s mansion. Meanwhile, a “segregationist group of 10 white youths” led by a member of the White Citizen’s Council also marched outside the stately colonial building. The two marches “crossed” but “there were no incidents,” according to a report. While both groups engaged in direct action for their respective causes, members of the UPO also assembled in the capital city, where they agreed to send telegrams to U.S. Senators Tower and Yarborough, asking them to end their “silence” and speak out on the issue of civil rights. The conservative

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101 Lopez, “Union Leaders Press for Action.” In fact, the Texas AFL-CIO had already planned to stage two additional border wage and job conferences, one in McAllen or Harlingen one week after the Laredo gathering, and a third in El Paso the following week. Banks, “Businessmen Shun Parley.”

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African American club reiterated that it supported the President’s push for “enforceable legislation,” and it pledged to lobby the state’s Congressional delegation “by direct contact.” The group quickly added that it continued to support the Governor despite the fact that they disagreed about privately-owned public accommodations. One report added that the UPO considered Connally’s position “the most positive stand of any state official in Texas history.”102

The battle lines were thus clearly drawn as Bonner prepared for his August 6 meeting with Connally. Although he had staged the sit-in alone, he had previously written a letter to the governor’s office requesting a group meeting, and he felt he had been assured as much when he scheduled the appointment. He invited other members of the liberal TCV from San Antonio and Dallas, and a mixed-race group of activists made their way to Austin for the big day. The TCV activists included G. J. Sutton, Rev. Claude Black, and Dr. Ruth Bellinger McCoy of San Antonio’s Eastside, along with E. Brice Cunningham of Dallas, the council’s executive secretary, and Bonner. The two liberal leaders of San Antonio’s ethnic Mexican Westside were also represented: Albert Peña sent Henry Muñoz, who had quit the Teamsters to work full-time for the Commissioner, and Henry B. Gonzalez’ aide, Lalo Solis, identified in reports as a simple “restaurant owner.” James McCoy of Corsicana (no relation to Ruth), a student at the University of Texas and a member of Bonner’s local group, rounded out the delegation.103

The group approached Connally’s office but was refused entry by the governor’s assistant, Howard Rose, who stated that only Bonner would be permitted to see the Governor. Perhaps Connally refused the group because of the demonstration the night

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102 “Negroes Ask Texas Solons to Take Stand,” *San Antonio Light*, August 2, 1963 (all quotations).
before, when Bonner staged his sixth protest at the governor’s mansion, accompanied by approximately sixty other pickets. The group chanted “Freedom, yes; Connally, no,” and again marched across the street to the capitol. In any event, when Rose refused to admit the entire delegation, B.T. flatly refused to go it alone. “I’m not making this fight for Booker T. Bonner,” he told reporters afterwards, “and I cannot speak for one million Negroes [in Texas].” That evening, Bonner and a group of about forty supporters again picketed the governor’s mansion, carrying signs reading “He wouldn’t see us.” A segregationist group of hecklers followed them to the capitol, chanting “Bonner, you ran away today” (and other, more “obscene” comments).104

The delegation had planned to present the Governor with a petition for an eight-point civil rights program. After refusing to meet Connally by himself, Bonner gave the petition to the press but said that he did not plan “to submit it through the back door”—gesturing to the Jim Crow practice in which African Americans were expected to seek service or enter buildings through rear entrances.

The program itself reflected the long-time aspirations of the militant group of liberal and working-class civil rights activists. They demanded that the Governor issue an executive order ending “racial discrimination” in all state-owned facilities, parks, and hospitals as well as a state ordinance prohibiting segregation in privately-owned public accommodations. They also asked for immediate integration of every school district and the state’s higher education system. Most importantly, they demanded that the Governor issue orders that would immediately integrate state jobs, remove racial references from

all applications for state employment, and withhold state funds from contractors who practice discrimination. They called for repeal of the 1957 school segregation laws (which Henry B. Gonzalez had famously filibustered) and “a minimum wage of not less than $1.25 per hour.”

G. J. Sutton criticized Connally for refusing to meet with the group, drawing attention to the Governor’s preferential treatment of other visitors while feigning political naïveté. “We just don’t understand what reasoning the governor has,” he said.

I remember just a few weeks back when he made an address before the [UPO]...he made the statement that his office was open to the public at all times. Naturally, we would feel the governor’s office was open but he just refused to see us... Seemingly, it’s the policy of the governor to see Negroes one at a time. It would take a long time to get our problems over to the governor individually.

Sutton publicly gestured toward the cozy relationship between Connally and the UPO while attacking his failure to keep the door open for groups of liberal African Americans. Privately, Sutton returned home to San Antonio and began making plans for the August 28 march.

While Sutton assailed the Governor’s hypocritical actions, B. T. Bonner soon found his own character under attack. A reporter from the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* dug up an old file in a Houston courthouse that showed that Bonner had been convicted of “mail theft,” in 1945, when he was seventeen years old. Bonner initially refused to respond, declaring that his past was off-limits to reporters, but within twenty-four hours he admitted to being convicted on a charge of federal “embezzlement.” He had been sentenced to three years in prison, but the sentence was suspended on condition of good behavior. He was soon drafted into the Army, and the suspension was excused early as

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105 “Connally, Negro Fail To Hold Talk,” 12.
106 “Sutton Says Door Barred,” *San Antonio Express*, August 7, 1963, 6-D.

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he was sent to Korea. “I am a little disturbed about spending all that time over there for
nothing and coming back and finding out that I am not so good,” Bonner explained to the
Dallas Morning News. He added that he had “been a pretty angry person all my life but
not a bad person.”

The revelation of his criminal past called his claim of employment discrimination
based on race into question, but Bonner refused to agree that his conviction was the
reason that he could not get good jobs. Still, Bonner emphasized that the civil rights
campaign would continue. “We’ve given up on the governor,” he said, adding that
various groups were now making plans for the August 28 march on the state capitol. The
“self-styled leader of the effort,” in the words of one journalist, also acknowledged that
he was no longer at its helm. “This isn’t mine now,” Bonner told him. “It belongs to
several groups of people.” Despite such pronouncements, Bonner was again at the
head of a protest at the governor’s mansion just two days later, on August 9. A group of
forty people joined him in picketing, and Bonner told reporters that the group would
demonstrate every Friday in support of Kennedy’s civil rights bill.

Behind the scenes, Bonner, Sutton, and African American organizers across the
state all got to work preparing for the August 28 marches on Austin and Washington.
San Antonio activists added a sit-in at City Hall to their agenda, while activists from
Houston, Dallas, and Fort Worth all planned to join the state and national protests
instead. Harry Burns, the head of the San Antonio NAACP, explained that the protest

“would be for civil rights and job opportunities.” He continued to attack the so-called “moderate” alternative. “The voluntary desegregation program...has proven very unsatisfactory, Burns said. “Not one week has passed since July 4 that we have not received some reports of discrimination against Negroes. Any further delay is further inference to businessmen that they can continue to practice segregation.” Burns also reported that fifteen San Antonians had already left for Washington while a “large delegation” would caravan to Austin in “10 to 20” carloads on the morning of the 28th. Eugene Coleman, publisher of SNAP News, was appointed to act as parade marshal from San Antonio. Rev. A.A. McCardell, president of Houston’s NAACP chapter, likewise indicated that one busload of protestors would travel from his city to Washington and another would participate in the Austin rally.

Albert Peña also organized on behalf of the predominately black civil rights march, spreading news of the planned action and building support for it among local PASO chapters. On August 22, Bexar County PASO passed a resolution going on record in favor of the “peaceful demonstrations” planned for Austin and Washington and “urging Governor John Connally to meet his responsibility as the Chief Executive of this state and as head of the Democratic Party in Texas, by meeting with the Demonstrators in Austin and using his influence and prestige to redress these wrongs.” (The organizers later abandoned the idea of seeking another meeting with Connally.) On August 25, Peña brought this resolution to a regional PASO meeting in Houston, where he also gave a

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111 “City, State, D.C. Action Scheduled By S.A. NAACP,” San Antonio Express, August 19, 1963, 4-D.
passionate speech endorsing the march. “It is my sincere hope that the freedom or so-called protest march...will awaken the conscience of all Americans,” he began. The “much-debated public accommodations section” was particularly important, he added. “The affronts and denials that this section, if enacted, would correct are intensely human and personal. Very often they harm the physical body, but always they strike at the root of the human spirit. From the time Negroes leave home in the morning en route to school or work, to shopping or to visiting, until they return home at night, humiliation stalks them.” Despite the fact that slavery was abolished one hundred years earlier, “the Negro remains in bondage to the color of his skin,” Peña concluded.113

Throughout all the preparations, B.T. Bonner remained the undisputed leader of the Austin march. He formed the Freedom Now Committee, and it was this the group that obtained a permit for the 2-mile parade route, from Rosewood Park in all-black East Austin past the capitol grounds and culminating in a rally at the nearby Wooldridge Park downtown. He said he didn’t know if 25 or 10,000 marchers would attend the event, but no matter what they would raise their voices in protest. A white segregationist claimed he expected 3,000 counter-demonstrators from around the state, despite the fact that Connally urged them to stay home to avoid an “incident.”114

When the big day finally arrived, around 1,000 demonstrators joined the civil rights march as it wound its way across Austin in 102-degree heat (eleven segregationists heckled them until they were removed by police). Perhaps a fifth of the marchers were white, and a handful of ethnic Mexicans also participated. Several hundred Austin

113 Bexar County PASO, “Resolution,” August 22, 1963 (first quotation); “Statement of Commissioner Albert A. Pena, Jr, As Chairman of Bexar County Democratic Coalition and State Chairman on Civil Rights March,” Houston, August 25, 1963—both in Peña Papers, UTSA-ITC, Box 22, Folder 8.
teenagers organized by Bonner joined the veteran activists from across the state.

“Freedom Now” was the march’s main theme, but demonstrators also carried countless homemade signs. Some compared Connally to George Wallace of Alabama or Orville Faubus of Arkansas, while others carried creative slogans linking labor and civil rights: “No more 50c per hour” and “Segregation is a new form of slavery.” One read “Kennedy sí, Connally no.” The marchers sang movement songs attacking the Governor: “Tell John Connally, we shall not be moved…”115

The march made its way past the capitol without stopping—organizers claimed that the police had turned on the lawn sprinklers to keep them off the grounds, while the Governor conducted “regular business” inside. Having “given up” on Connally, who made it clear he would not receive them, the leaders had canceled earlier plans to again present him with their eight-point petition. Rev. Black of San Antonio later noted the contrast between Connally, who flatly refused to meet with them, and President Kennedy, who had met with civil rights leaders that morning, prior to the March on Washington.116

Instead the marchers in Austin kept walking to a nearby park, where they assembled to hear a range of speakers “roast” the Governor. “The rally appeared to be as much an anti-Connally political affair as a demonstration for racial equality,” the Dallas Morning News derisively reported. The Observer more accurately stated that “The rally linked themes of racial justice and opposition to Connally.” Both its sympathizers and detractors agreed that the march’s implications extended beyond the immediate push for

the federal civil rights bill to include a broader push for political power. The speakers left no doubt in the crowd’s mind: Dr. Marion Brooks of the Fort Worth NAACP and TCV called on the protestors to come together “to sweep the statehouse clean.” Rev. Black put it in Manichean terms that highlighted the legacies of slavery and the persistence of low-wage labor and political powerlessness:

The little people of our state have located the center of authority. The men who lay the lashers on our backs, who cause us to work for less than we’re worth, are located in the center of that granite building over there [pointing toward the capitol]... We have come to warn Gov. Connally and all the other segregationists that their days are numbered. They can no longer abuse the Negro by trying to show him only a part of his freedom... [He] has sold out to those who would restrict us.¹¹⁷

The speakers’ list and march participants reflected the vibrancy of the statewide Democratic Coalition and its local affiliates. Francis Williams of the HCCO emceed the event, and civil rights unionist Moses LeRoy gave a brief speech. Ruth Bellinger McCoy spoke for the Bexar County Coalition, as did Henry Muñoz, who read a revised version of Albert Peña’s PASO speech. “The Negro today asks justice,” he said.

We do not answer him...when we reply to the Negro by asking ‘Patience.’ Along with the Negro and in many instances worse off, patiently waiting is the Mexican-American...at the bottom of the scale, the first to be fired, the last to be hired... the most neglected, the least sponsored, the most orphaned minority group. To ask for patience from the Negro is to ask him to give more of what he has already given enough. In this hour, it is not our respective races which are at stake—it is our nation.

The leaders of the Texas AFL-CIO could not attend the march: they were holding their annual convention in Houston at that exact moment, but Hank Brown sent a letter and a representative to read it on his behalf. G. J. Sutton was among those in the crowd, as was Martin Garcia, the lead Teamsters-PASO organizer of the Crystal City uprising. Mrs.

Erma LeRoy attended the event and shouted to a reporter: “The governor is politically dead!” Larry Goodwyn, “staff man of the Democratic Coalition,” walked alongside Sutton for parts of the march and told the Observer that the Coalition “endorses peaceful demonstrations for civil rights.”

But the strongest statements that linked the march to the Coalition and liberal political organizing came from W. J. Durham, president of the TCV and Coalition co-chair. The march represented those group’s “first answer to the pro-Connally United Political Organization (UPO),” wrote Ronnie Dugger of the Observer. Durham made their opposition clear. “I think UPO stands for ‘Under political orders,’” he said. It “is made up of bought conservative Negroes who have their hands out for money and who jump on all other Negroes.” The day has passed when the Governor and other conservatives “can separate Negroes, except those few who are conservative and have gotten super rich...” he continued.

They’ll never separate the Latin-American and Negroes again in politics. They’ll never separate the independent white man and the Negro again. They’ll never separate labor and the Negro again. We’re going to march on the street, pray on the streets, sit in the streets, walk on the streets. We’re going to fight at the ballot box and in the courts. I believe that’s the last message I’ve got for my governor.

B. T. Bonner added that “Negroes, Latin Americans and labor union members will be ‘registered to vote in unprecedented numbers,’” while Marion Brooks said that they would “stick together with their liberal, labor, and Latin-American allies.”

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UPO leaders were fully aware of the march’s frontal assault on their organization. Rev. H. Rhett James of Dallas, the organization’s executive-secretary, told reporters that “he did not attend the march because of the ‘planned political overtones.’” The TCV and the Democratic Coalition, he charged, were “using the race issue” to promote Don Yarborough as yet unannounced campaign against Connally in the 1964 Democratic primary. James said the UPO did not oppose demonstrations but wanted them “pitched on issues and not personalities.” James added that Durham’s statements were just “sour grapes.”

Such criticisms intentionally obscured what Dugger called the “linked themes of racial injustice and opposition to Connally,” attempting to downplay the formal political power wielded by elected officials who largely determined the status of civil rights on the ground. For organizers such as Bonner, Sutton, Durham, and LeRoy, however, these issues were inextricably intertwined. Just as Peña had criticized PASO and labor for making politically expedient alliances, the activists of the TCV believed that the UPO could not demand freedom while subordinating it to the Governor’s program of moderation. Only independent political action could result in self-determination, in the ability to choose one’s own representatives and create public policies that reflected the longtime aspirations of their community. While the leaders of the UPO had “their hands out for money” and were getting “super rich,” the liberal African American activists demanded nothing less than complete autonomy, integration, and equal opportunity.

They did so by seeking multiracial alliances with like-minded ethnic Mexican and white activists. While intra-ethnic conflict raged, inter-ethnic cooperation offered these

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120 “Negro Leader Calls March Anti-Connally Political Rally.”
activists opportunities to outflank their opposition as they continued their decades-long quest for political and economic democracy.

Ethnic Mexicans and the white-led labor movement did much the same thing, advancing their own protracted struggles for democracy by seeking (and finding) alliances with one another and with African Americans. Each group depended on the other, and the Democratic Coalition was their hope for the future. After three decades of experimenting in “coalitioning,” as W.J. Durham called the agonizing up-and-down, back-and-forth process, veteran activists were now deliberately attempting their boldest coordinated action yet. They did not always agree with another, but the multiracial partnership was anything but expedient. The next year would test whether it met their extremely lofty expectations.

**Of Poll Taxes and Bootstraps**

While the wars of words between the multiracial group of civil rights activists and Gov. Connally and his supporters made most of the headlines, behind the scenes the quotidian organizing work of the Democratic Coalition quietly got underway. Soon after its mid-July meetings, the Coalition formed a new non-profit organization called Voters of Texas Enlist (VOTE) to coordinate the upcoming campaign to repeal the poll tax in a constitutional referendum election on November 9, 1963. Project VOTE would work “to extend the coalition to the grass roots with maximum speed” by developing an army of “blockworkers” in heavily African American and ethnic Mexican precincts across the state. Preliminary plans called for full-time paid “project officers” to fan out across the state, select volunteer “precinct captains” for each polling place, and for those activists to recruit one “blockworker” for each group of twenty voters in their target area. The plan
called for reaching 240,000 black and brown voters through 12,000 blockworkers. Doing so would dramatically boost turnout in black and brown neighborhoods and rural districts from historically low figures that hovered around 10% in off-year elections to three or even five times that percentage. If they could “get-out-the-vote” on that scale, Coalition activists believed they could not only tip the scales in the repeal referendum but also set the stage for a massive voter registration effort immediately afterward and a liberal victory in 1964.

Born as it was from the Democratic Coalition, VOTE from the start incorporated a diverse group of veteran African American, ethnic Mexican, and white activists. If “only the mexicano can speak for the mexicano,” as George Sanchez had long asserted, then only ethnic Mexican project officers could recruit ethnic Mexican precinct captains, who could in turn find ethnic Mexican blockworkers who would then successfully turn out twenty ethnic Mexican voters each. The same held true for African Americans and white labor union members, though the latter remained the province of the AFL-CIO’s COPE, while VOTE focused on black and brown voters.

Consequently, dozens of longtime labor, civil rights, and political activists—who had fought countless local battles over the decades and more recently built the Democratic Coalition and the civil rights campaigns of the summer—quickly transitioned into the on-the-ground leadership of Project VOTE.

At the same time, the Texas AFL-CIO extended its new “educational” organizing initiative among ethnic Mexicans. It launched “Operation Bootstrap,” an unprecedentedly massive foray into not only the Valley but the barrios of Dallas and San Antonio as well. The program’s “Public Information Officers,” or “PIOs,” carried the
messages of unionism and independent political action to a dizzying array of ethnic Mexican civil rights organizations, social and fraternal clubs, and worksites throughout Texas. And in the two designated cities, where African Americans also continued to organize, the PIOs helped build local multiracial civil rights and political coalitions.

The “repeal the poll tax” referendum failed, but breakdowns of the results revealed that the Coalition’s “blockworker” strategy was working. As planned, VOTE immediately shifted to collecting poll taxes for the 1964 elections, working to translate its newly-organized army of “blockworkers” into a massive voter registration crusade. All was proceeding according to form until November 22, 1963, when the assassination of President Kennedy irrevocably altered the political landscape. Gov. John Connally, previously the target of their efforts, became all but untouchable when a bullet intended for the President hit him instead. VOTE continued to register voters en masse, but the wind soon left its sails.

Still, many of the Coalition’s veteran activists rallied behind the re-election campaigns of first Sen. Ralph Yarborough and then President Lyndon B. Johnson. Black, brown, and white organizers also continued to engage in municipal political and civil rights struggles, converting the precinct captains and blockworkers of VOTE into their own local electoral machines.

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Project VOTE got underway in earnest soon after the “Freedom Now” march in Austin in late August. Columnist Jon Ford of the San Antonio Express-News commented that the Coalition had “rattled enough swords” in recent weeks to make “even the most complacent conservative Democrats” recognize its presence. While speakers at the civil
rights march lashed out at the Governor, the Texas AFL-CIO in convention in Houston endorsed the demonstrations in Austin and Washington, “passed strong integration resolutions,” and reiterated its call for Connally to call a special session on civil rights. The labor delegates also decided to withhold support from any candidate who refused to advocate the repeal of the right to work law, which the Governor had failed to do in 1962. For his part, Connally had openly snubbed both the civil rights demonstrators and organized labor. Ford noted that W. J. Durham and other speakers had promised to deliver change at the ballot box, but he cautioned that “estimates of the potential united strength of the coalition vary widely.” Still, it was clear that the Coalition would “be a figure and force to cause politicians intent on self preservation to sit up and take notice.” The liberals’ path to controlling the Democratic Party would not be easy, despite predictions that conservatives would defect to the GOP, Ford added. But the “liberal movement” was far more than “sour grapes,” as UPO leader Rhett James had claimed. The Coalition “may not accomplish anything spectacular in 1964,” he concluded, “but spectacular results are not outside the realm of possibility.”

As the rhetoric of Durham, Peña, and Brown suggested—and Ford astutely observed—the Coalition had high hopes for 1964. The key to victory was the mass registration of African American and ethnic Mexican voters. Passage of the November 9 constitutional referendum repealing the poll tax would greatly simplify their task. Either way, building an organization now would pay off when the annual poll tax season began after the repeal election.

121 Jon Ford, “Texas Liberals Rattling Swords at Conservatives,” San Antonio Express, September 2, 1963, 6-A.
In late July, 1963, Coalition director Larry Goodwyn and Texas AFL-CIO leaders and COPE staff began planning for the repeal campaign. Earlier that year the Texas AFL-CIO had testified before the state legislature, arguing against putting the repeal referendum on a special election ballot in an off-year. Paid poll taxes for 1963 were down some 300,000 voters “in heavily Democratic precincts” as compared to 1962, and turnout in similar off-year issue-focused races in previous fifty years hovered around 22%. Texas election officials predicted a turnout of only 325,000 voters in statewide election, though labor leaders expected a total around 400,000 instead.122

The best chance for repeal, and thus for victory the next year, was to create a massive campaign to get-out-the-vote among African Americans and ethnic Mexicans on November 9. Coalition members proposed Project VOTE, “a blockworker program that reaches into the precincts on a house-by-house, street-by-street basis...” Preliminary arrangements had already been laid, the plan said, by developing “a working relationship...between labor and the rank-and-file leadership” of black and brown activist groups. “The task now is to put this working relationship to use...to cash in on the cooperation between labor and the minorities that has already been accomplished by the Coalition.”123

The process was relatively simple conceptually, but it would require “one hell of a lot of grubby, detailed work.” First, “poll tax lists and criss-cross directories must be broken down into block lists” of twenty voters, groups that would be passed along to the individual blockworkers. The separate county lists and directories were later “put into IBM machines, to re-shuffle them by street address and produce ‘walk lists’” for each

blockworker. The second step was to recruit the rank and file and “sell” them on the program. The plan cautioned,

...nothing is more useless than a list of 20 people, however well organized it may be by blocks, if there is no blockworker to contact them...Through the contacts already established in the coalition, have local Negro and PASO organizations promote a huge mass meeting in [each of] the 15 priority cities. The blockworker program is then sold to the precinct troops through the use of the Team Program...It stirs people to action. If the Negro and PASO organizations can get the bodies to a mass meeting, the Team Program will sell them the program and begin the recruiting...

As the plan indicated, the Team Program, led by Arthur DeWitty of the Austin TCV and Martin Garcia of PASO, brought black and brown community leaders and fiery speakers together for pep rallies in support of political action. It was the motivational-speaker arm of the Coalition, “thoroughly tested” and proven to be effective. African American and ethnic Mexican groups were charged with finding potential recruits and bringing them to the meeting. The final step of the plan was to get the lists of twenty voters into the hands of the blockworkers “in such a way that they know (1) what to do (2) when to do it (3) that a check will be made on them.” VOTE headquarters would secure tens of thousands of fliers and “hand cards” to carry into the polls and put them into packets of twenty along with instruction sheets for the individual blockworkers. It would also set up a “telephone boiler operation that contacts the blockworkers and checks on them.” Finally, the local project officers, a group composed of one full-time “minority group person in each city,” were charged with updating card-files, sending names of each new blockworker recruit back to headquarters, helping “ram-rod recruiting of blockworkers,” and “co-ordinat[ing] with Negro organizations and with PASO.”

124 Ibid, 2, 4 (first, second, block, and remaining quotations); “The Repeal Election” (third quotation) and “Budget (November 15 through January 31)—both enclosed in letter from Larry Goodwyn to Co
Coalition members contributed funds and personnel to Project Vote as it got underway in August and September. The budget, which rapidly ballooned, depended heavily on donations from “independent” liberals and labor. An initial budget projection for the repeal campaign get-out-the-vote effort asked for only $17,000, of which $7,000 had already been raised. The budget called for an addition $5,000 each from the “independent” liberals and the Texas AFL-CIO. Labor, of course, also allocated money for COPE—for which it had appropriated a whopping $300,000 for the entire 1964 election cycle (the late August convention increased the total from $180,000 in 1962). VOTE, which targeted black and brown voters, most of whom were not union members, initially appeared to be a drop in the bucket. But costs quickly jumped skyward: By September 3, the Coalition and VOTE had already spent a combined $21,500, and staffers asked for $24,000 for the last month of the campaign. The final cost ended up approaching $70,000.\footnote{Budget, Statewide Blockworker Program to Repeal the Poll Tax [initial, appended to “1963 Voter Registration Drive”]; V.O.T.E. Budget October 6 through November 9 election, with handwritten notes, Lambert Papers, AR127-30-5; Letter from Goodwyn to Co-Chairmen, November 15, 1963.}

While the budget reflected a sizable financial contribution from two legs of the Coalition, the staff depended heavily upon members of the other two—as well as black and brown labor people. In fact, VOTE brought together a diverse group of many of the Coalition’s most battle-tested activists. Larry Goodwyn remained the executive director; Albert Fuentes, the longtime PASO leader, directed activities among ethnic Mexicans; and Erma LeRoy coordinated the project’s African American “leg.” Both Fuentes and LeRoy also served as “co-directors” of the entire campaign. Latane Lambert conducted labor outreach, while Martin Wiginton of Austin nominally coordinated activities for the
fourth leg, the “independent” liberals. In practice, both spent much of their time helping Goodwyn run the state office. Barbara Jordan, a black attorney and activist in the HCD who had run unsuccessfully for the legislature in 1962, coordinated Houston activities, where she was joined by two other paid project officers. B.T. Bonner was the “project officer” for black voters in Austin. Journalist Julia Scott Reed took that charge in Dallas, joined by J.O. “Pepper” Garcia of PASO’s local labor chapter who had helped her build a local coalition there. Mrs. Lenora Rolla, a longtime TCV activist, was the officer for Fort Worth. In San Antonio, Dr. Ruth Bellinger McCoy took the reins for the Eastside, doubtlessly with the blessing of G.J. Sutton and the other SNAP activists. Ruben Nuñez coordinated the Westside effort, again with the endorsement of Peña and the PASO chapter. Maggie Mull, the ethnic Mexican wife of Teamster organizer Raleigh Mull (an Anglo) and a longtime leader in labor’s Women’s Activities Division, assisted Nuñez on the Westside. Erasmo Garza, a leader of the “PASO doble” chapter in Corpus Christi that remained loyal to Peña and the state organization, was a project officer in Nueces County. Three other ethnic Mexican and four more African American project officers rounded out the campaign staff, along with Team Program coordinators DeWitty and Garcia.\textsuperscript{126}

In short, the twenty “project directors in the field” in sixteen different cities were almost entirely ethnic Mexicans and African Americans, while the nine-member state staff reflected the egalitarian leadership structure of the four-legged Democratic Coalition. Labor donated a full-time coordinator (Lambert) and much-needed dollars and

\textsuperscript{126} V.O.T.E. Budget October 6 through November 9 election; Budget (November 15 through January 31) in Goodwyn to Co-Chairmen, November 15, 1963; V.O.T.E. Executive Board Meeting agenda, October 19, 1963, Lambert Papers AR127- 28-1 (misfiled in archive); “Temporary Directory of Project Directors *** Blockworker Program,” October 10, 1963, Texas AFL-CIO Democratic Correspondence, AR110-26-9-5.
conducted its own outreach effort to its predominately-white membership. Project VOTE did the rest.\textsuperscript{127}

In the seven weeks prior to the November 9 vote, the project officers frantically contacted friendly precinct captains, found new precinct leaders where none existed, and worked to make sure that each area would have one blockworker for every twenty voters by election day. The officers met frequently with their volunteers to check on their progress and then called or mailed headquarters with contact information for each new blockwalker. They knocked on doors, house-by-house, street-by-street, and attended countless meetings of local civil rights, fraternal, and social organizations in their assigned communities.

In some cases, they organized various clubs as they worked. Albert Fuentes of PASO, assigned to coordinate ethnic Mexican participation in the effort, simultaneously used his post to make contact with and revivify established PASO chapters while also organizing new ones. His one surviving report provides a snapshot of the day-to-day activities of a VOTE organizer. On September 25, Fuentes told Wiginton that blockworker programs had already been established in “Mexican-American precincts” in El Paso, San Antonio, Corpus Christi, Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and Hidalgo and Cameron counties in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Fuentes had “personally contacted the PASO groups in each of these areas . . . . conferring with them about the blockworker program and urging them to fully co-operate.” Fuentes also reported that PASO chapters existed in fifteen additional counties from Orange in southeast Texas to Webb County out west (Laredo). Again, he had been in touch with each group in order

to explain the “Coalition and VOTE program, and the need for the immediate campaign to repeal the poll tax. The groups have also been advised and urged to obtain the poll lists and maps of each Mexican-American precinct in their county [sic], and to use these materials in a person-to-person canvass...” Finally, Wiginton reported that Fuentes had plans to attend meetings of PASO chapters in six different locales in the next month, including one in San Antonio with “Free beer and tamales.”

Few staffers barnstormed the entire state in this manner, but Fuentes’s report still indicates the systematic, comprehensive, and high-paced nature of the campaign. Lambert, LeRoy, Wiginton, and Goodwyn probably criss-crossed Texas to attend various meetings, as did the Team Program coordinators who held mass meeting in each of the sixteen different project cities. On a smaller scale, each of the twenty project officers likewise visited each of their target precincts, reported on the status of each one, held countless community meetings, recruited leaders, and returned repeatedly until each one was organized. And they then attended statewide meetings to report on their progress.

As VOTE staffers worked to spread the Coalition to the grassroots, the group’s detractors also made their voices heard. Gov. Connally was the Coalition’s critic-in-chief, and Albert Peña bore the brunt of the criticism. Back in May, the Bexar County Commissioners Court censured Peña for his role in the Crystal City uprising. Peña and the local PASO chapter rebutted the charges, but it was clear that his fellow

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128 Martin Wiginton, Report on PASO Activities, September 26, 1963, based on his meeting with Fuentes the previous day, Texas AFL-CIO Democratic Correspondence, AR110-26-9-5.
129 This paragraph summarizes dozens of documents on the repeal and subsequent poll tax campaigns. For an explicit explanation of the on-the-ground tactics, see, for example, “Project Director’s Guide,” Texas AFL-CIO Democratic Correspondence, AR110-26-9-5; Letter from Martin Wiginton to “Project Officer,” October 12, 1963, 2, Lambert Papers, AR127-3-6; “Urban Program,” enclosure in Letter from Goodwyn to Co-Chairmen, November 15, 1963. Goodwyn and Peña joined Fuentes, DeWitty, and Texas AFL-CIO public relations director Lyman Jones at a motivational meeting in Corpus Christi that was probably a Team Program pep rally. See “Ethnic ‘Marriage’ Key to Influence.”
representatives had turned against him. On September 1, the San Antonio columnist writing under the pseudonym Don Politico commented Peña had become two men with wildly different fortunes. “The political star of PASO Chairman Pena is twinkling high and merrily in the Texas skies,” he wrote. “But that of Commissioner Pena has dipped into near permanent eclipse.” While Peña spent much of the previous week out of town attacking Gov. Connally before Houston PASO and the state AFL-CIO convention, he remained under fire whenever he came back to San Antonio. On seven different occasions the other commissioners had thwarted him, including appointments to local boards and one case in which they denied Henry Muñoz a job on the county’s payroll.130

Yet the loudest criticism came from the Governor himself. At a League of Women Voters summit called to promote the repeal campaign, Connally surprised observers when he used his speech to attack Peña, charging him with trying to amass block votes to take over the state” through PASO “with the help of the AFL-CIO unions and Negro groups.” Addressing the largely blue-haired “non-partisan” group, Connally claimed that Peña and the Coalition were attempting to capture the poll tax initiative that the League had long advocated for their own partisan purposes. Organizers from the sponsoring group and the audience afterward questioned whether the Governor’s statements helped or hurt the repeal effort, according to newspaper reports. “Roy Evans, state AFL-CIO treasurer who often spars politically with Connally, expressed puzzlement as to ‘why he did it. Is he really for repeal?,’” Evans asked. The labor man also defended the Coalition co-chairman. “Denying that Pena is a ‘boss,’ Evans said the San Antonio politico is ‘an influential individual, but he is the antithesis of the old “patron.”’

130 Don Politico, “Pena Travels Lumpy Road,” San Antonio Light, September 1, 1963; “Bexar PASO Censures County Dads,” San Antonio Light, August 16, 1963—clippings of both in SAPL-VF.
it wrong for Latin Americans and labor and Negroes to encourage citizenship, but never wrong for big business to do the same?’ Evans asked.” Evans stated the Coalition’s case ably, but Peña needed little help. He laid into Connally days later, noting that the Governor was a beneficiary of the Viva Kennedy movement and the integrationist administration that he now opposed. “I will never understand why the governor would deliberately alienate minority voters to satisfy personal whims of segregationists. I will never understand why the governor would make a whipping boy out of organized labor.” The only way for the Democratic Party to continue to win “is to register more Mexican-American and Negro voters,” he added.131

Peña’s and Evans’s rebuttals notwithstanding, Connally’s attack on labor apparently had some effect on the grassroots. In late September, for example, J. W. “Bill” Ricks, a leader of the oil workers in Port Arthur and a labor delegate to the 100-member Democratic Coalition steering committee, wrote to Hank Brown to express his concern, albeit indirectly. “There are rumors going around that our COPE money is being delivered to unauthorized people...” Ricks wrote, demanding a letter explaining what was going on. Brown attempted to assuage his (and his members’) concerns by delineating the VOTE program in detail, highlighting its able leadership and downplaying its cost:

[The] COPE Operating Committee also approved the sum of $5,000 as a contribution to VOTE (coalition). This is one--fourth (1/4) of their total budget for sixty days. Their program is concentrated on various minority groups. I am inclosing [sic] a list of their coordinators. This minority program is run and conducted under the supervision of Larry Goodwin [sic] and we have assigned Mrs. Latane Lambert as our liaison with VOTE. The VOTE organization is a separate and distinct program from Texas COPE, although we do seek cooperation between VOTE

131 “Connally’s Pena Blast Stirs State,” San Antonio News, September 10, 1963; “Pena Hits Back At Governor,” no publication, no date [September 11, 1963]—clippings in SAPL-VF.
coordinators in each area and COPE Coordinators in each area. We believe that both programs are off the ground, through a lot of hard work, and we will Repeal the Poll Tax on November 9th.\textsuperscript{132}

By the end of the seven-week campaign, VOTE’s coordinators and project officers had navigated the minefields of gubernatorial whipping and internal dissent among laborers and were approaching their goal. They had hoped, “ideally” to recruit 12,000 volunteer blockwalkers to reach 240,000 African American and ethnic Mexican voters on election day. They fell short, but not by much. Nearly 9,000 blockworkers signed and returned “Freedom Pledge Cards” and just under 8,000 “actually received blockworker kits” with walk lists by November 9.\textsuperscript{133}

The repeal referendum failed by a margin of 56% to 44%, or 72,000 votes of almost 525,000 cast. Writing in the \textit{Washington Post}, the Observer’s Ronnie Dugger attributed the measure’s defeat to a rising “white backlash” against rising civil rights militancy. The repeal became a “liberal cause,” and “the prospect of Texas Negroes and Latin-Americans voting in proportion to their numbers alarmed segregationist whites.” Yet the backlash was not limited to the eleven rednecks who staged the white supremacist counter-demonstration on August 28. Rather, “The prospect of poorer voters menacing business control of the Statehouse neutralized what had started out to be support for repeal from...the conservative establishment,” especially in the last few weeks prior to the election when what Ralph Yarborough called “Corporate interests” launched an intensive media blitz. Dugger also commented that Connally’s speech blasting Peña for attempting


\textsuperscript{133} “Background,” 2, enclosure in letter from Goodwyn to Co-Chairmen, November 15, 1963.
“bloc voting” had awoken fears among the white electorate and “hurt the cause of repeal.”

The election marked “the first test” of the Democratic Coalitions blockworker program, Dugger added. While VOTE leaders conceded that they did not, in two months, reach their goal of 240,000 contacts, they believed that the method had worked as planned, boosting African American turnout above the rate of white voters. Dugger wrote: “Liberal leaders appear to be convinced that the block workers approach, persisted in, will yield better dividends in 1964. Many Negro volunteer workers and Latin-Americans became involved in precinct activity for the first time.” A key tool, Dugger added, was a letter from Martin Luther King that appeared in the blockwalker kits for black districts. “In the Delta of Mississippi, in Alabama, in southwest Georgia, in so many places we cannot vote... I call upon you to vote for repeal of the poll tax . . . and unleash a flood-tide of new voters to help us secure our full rights as Americans.”

Indeed, the numbers were both encouraging and disturbing. According to a “Statistical Resume” compiled by VOTE project officers, “Latin turnout in blockworker precincts, statewide, was approximately 25% compared to 22% for Anglos and 36% for Negroes. Latin turnout in non-blockworker precincts averaged 11%. Negro turnout in non-blockworker precincts averaged 13%” (Dugger put the Anglo figure at 26%).

Clearly, the get-out-the-vote effort had a measurable effect, more than doubling black and brown turnout. Moreover, at the local level, it provided the margin of victory in Houston and San Antonio. In the former city, 55.2 per cent of whites voted against repeal, while

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87.1% of blacks voted for it. Only 24% of eligible whites voted, versus over 30% of blacks. The repeal measure passed with 53.6% of the votes, a margin of 6,000 ballots. In blockworker precinct in San Antonio, where VOTE had both African American and ethnic Mexican projects, 83% of blacks and 76.2% of browns voted for repeal. It passed with almost 54% of the vote. Project VOTE substantially boosted African American turnout in both Dallas and Fort Worth, where roughly 80-90% of blacks voted for repeal. Fort Worth blacks comprised one-sixth of the total electorate, tripling their influence year-over-year from 1962. In the small town of Weslaco, in Hidalgo County in the Lower Valley, ethnic Mexican turnout jumped fifteen percent, from 25.3% to 40%. The county as a whole enjoyed turnout in project areas of 31.5%—the best statewide performance of any “Latin” area.

Yet the growing backlash was also statistically apparent. In Dallas and Fort Worth, white voters in the 1962 Democratic primary had approved a non-binding referendum on the same question. In conservative Dallas, the margin was scant, but in Fort Worth more than 60% of whites voted for repeal in 1962. Turnout fell precipitously in both cities, and those that showed up did so to vote against repeal. Over 60% of whites voted against the measure in each city.136

While repeal failed, Project VOTE worked, and the effort fulfilled the Coalition’s larger goal of laying the groundwork for the 1964 primaries. Goodwyn summarized the staff’s evaluation of the blockworker program: “For the first time in Texas history, Negroes voted more heavily in an off-year special election than in the preceding Democratic primary,” he wrote. “That the special election concerned an issue, rather

than political candidates, underscores the effectiveness of the blockworker get-out-the-vote drive.” Given a little more time, or a little more money, the campaign would have recruited all 12,000 blockworkers “with a corresponding increase in the turnout.” More importantly, “the massive organizational effort... has produced a trained precinct army of 8,000 blockworkers to pour into the poll tax campaign. The state of readiness...is thus greater than at any time in the history of poll tax drives in Texas.” It was now time to “tighten the existing blockworker organization” and launch a new wave of workshops to train the “combat team” for the next round. As Dugger noted, many of these rank and file, volunteer activists had engaged in precinct-level political action for the first time. It would not be their last.137

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“What Now?” asked C. L. Mangus, a leader of the International Brother of Electrical Workers Local 60 in San Antonio, one week after the assassination of the President in Dallas. Writing in SNAP News, the presumably white union craftsman captured the sentiment of the nation and especially the legions of veteran civil rights activists who stood on the precipice of victory. Mangus knew the latter’s feelings intimately—he was one of them. “President Kennedy has left clear guidelines for us to follow,” he added, and “myriads of HIS people” would continue his work, including Ralph Yarborough, Henry B. Gonzalez, and Albert Peña. But those that fought and opposed the president would also continue their work, Mangus noted. So “let us each and every one go out and get a POLL TAX and USE IT on every possible occasion...Let

137 “Evaluation,” enclosure in letter from Goodwyn to Co-Chairmen.
us keep the plans of President Kennedy alive...[and] Let us be sure that HIS PEOPLE are kept in a position to carry on the work he began.”

Sitting next to the President and Mrs. Kennedy in the motorcade that day in Dallas was another couple, Governor and Mrs. John Connally. While the nation’s chief executive recoiled from shots to the head, Connally grimaced as bullets wounded his back, wrist, and thigh. In a surprising twist of fate, the “moderate” Governor who campaigned by both attacking the President and basking in his glory, who drew the ire of Kennedy’s fiercest supporters for opposing the civil rights act, who vehemently attacked the “bloc voting” that put the President in office—he was now forever linked to the martyred leader as his companion on his darkest day and in his final moments at Parkland Hospital.

Unlike “Jack,” however, John Connally survived, and his popularity soared. Conservative Texans who despised the President’s policies in life patriotically flocked to him in death, defending the Massachusetts liberal in the face of the right-wing extremism that killed him. Connally, the rational, “moderate,” friend of new President Lyndon Johnson, emerged as the man to lead them through the turmoil of demonstrations, civil unrest, political violence—and just below the surface—a shifting political landscape that threatened all the privileges, passed down from generation to generation, of white supremacy. It was a world turned upside down, and Connally appeared to be the only one who could turn it back to the way it was.

Johnson carried forward Kennedy’s policies, including the controversial public accommodations section of the civil rights package, but he also supported the political

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resurgence of his more conservative protégé, Connally. In fact, the entire Kennedy-Johnson tour of Texas counted the reunification of the state’s fractured Democratic Party as one of its goals. Johnson doubtlessly feared that the liberal and Republican assaults on Connally would hurt the national ticket’s ability to carry his home state, and he hoped to end the party’s internal divisions before they got any worse.

Even with the assassination, the tour did not succeed in closing the deep, ideologically-driven rift between the state’s multiracial liberal Coalition and the old-line conservatives that still dominated the party. Yet it did give Connally an air of personal invincibility, and it permanently crippled his opposition.

Hank Brown later remembered the “terrible, tragic assassination that changed the history of the whole world. It’s changed politics in Texas. I think Texas was moving fast, more and more to the liberal viewpoint, when—Boom!”

Although it greatly exaggerated the immediate impact of the attack on the President and Governor, Brown’s statement accurately reflected the changing terrain on which the Coalition was forced to operate. The multiracial group of liberals had already decided to continue Project VOTE to register black and brown voters en masse for 1964, and the campaign proceeded as scheduled. It asked “What Now?” and arrived at the same answer that Mangus advocated in the pages of SNAP: buy poll taxes and use them.

But for whom? Liberals of all colors eventually recognized that Connally would be difficult if not impossible to defeat. They also knew that they must work to re-elect Johnson to the presidency and Yarborough to the Senate and help a wide range of pro-

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labor and pro-civil rights candidates gain seat in the state legislature. Yarborough, in particular, was expected to face strong conservative opposition in the Democratic primary, as the assassination did nothing to bolster his strength with the party’s right wing. The Governor’s mansion may appear off limits, Coalition leaders reasoned, but the process of democratizing the state must continue. And the mass registration drive led by Project VOTE and its “army” of 8,000 volunteers was a way—the only way—to keep fighting.

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While the Coalition transitioned Project VOTE from the repeal election to the 1964 poll tax campaign, the Texas AFL-CIO expanded its “educational” organizing project among ethnic Mexicans. Project VOTE leaders hoped to expand its operations into additional cities and rural districts in order to renew the registrations of roughly 300,000 African Americans and ethnic Mexicans and add 325,000 new registrants in the targeted areas. Meanwhile, labor’s program to foster unionism and political activity among ethnic Mexicans—dubbed “Operation Bootstrap”—expanded from the one-man trial program announced in July to include five “public information officers,” three along the border and one each in San Antonio and North Texas (including both Dallas and Fort Worth). In fact, as the poll tax campaign began in earnest in December, the two initiatives blended together on the ground, especially in Dallas and San Antonio, where labor-funded PIOs collaborated with Coalition “project officers” to build local coalitions to register black and brown voters.140

140 On Project VOTE’s targets, see Letter from Goodwyn to Co-Chairmen, November 15, 1963, and enclosures.
Following the recommendations of the Latin American Affairs Committee meeting in Laredo, the delegates to the Texas AFL-CIO annual convention in Houston in August, 1963, approved an annual budget of $30,000 for Operation Bootstrap. The program, recalled Henry “the Fox” Muñoz, “was that the labor movement of Texas was going to go out into the field of what we call affectionately the ‘Mexican-Dixon Line’—that’s San Antonio to El Paso and south—and preach unionism and preach to organize politically...” The first PIO, J. H. “Henry” Villareal of Brownsville, remained on the state federation’s payroll, and he was joined soon after the convention by Jose Vasquez of the Webb County Central Labor Council (Laredo) and Louie Rosales of El Paso. In mid-December, Muñoz left his job with Peña to serve as the PIO for San Antonio (he had also been slated to work as Project VOTE’s “overall coordinator” for the Westside).  

The fifth and final PIO, Francisco F. “Pancho Medrano,” operated north of the “Mexican-Dixon” line in Dallas, where he had long been active in the UAW, local labor and political organizing, and the rising black and brown civil rights movements. A union member since 1941, he fought against discrimination on the job and became a shop steward and later a local officer. In 1962, he served as the chairman of the Texas AFL-CIO convention committee on Latin American Affairs. Earlier, he served as an officer for a chapter of the American G.I. Forum, even though he was not a veteran. Like many Forum members, he became active in the local Viva Kennedy club and then PASO. He joined the local “Labor PASO” faction led by J. O. “Pepper” and Franklin Garcia, and he helped two brothers seize control of the Dallas chapter from the hands of conservative...

141 Ibid, “Budget” (on the Coalition); Muñoz interview by Green, 26 (quotation); “Munoz Gets Union Post,” San Antonio Express, December 17, 1963, 2. The phrase “Mexican-Dixon line” is often attributed to Franklin Garcia, the PASO and Meat Cutters union organizer who was stationed in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, where he collaborated closely with Villareal and Bob Sanchez.
ethnic Mexicans. Medrano also joined Pepper in building an informal local coalition that crossed racial lines. At the same time, Pancho personally joined the NAACP, aided the sit-in demonstrations of black students at downtown department stores, and collected poll taxes for the Progressive Voters League, an African American organization linked to the TCV. He also attended the March on Washington on August 28 as part of the UAW’s delegation.142 In March 1963, on a temporary assignment from UAW headquarters in Detroit, Medrano traveled to Crystal City to aid the campaign of the cinco candidatos. Teamster organizer Carlos Moore invited Pancho to stay and join the unprecedented effort. Medrano brought not only his organizing skills but much-needed money from the UAW, funds that allowed the town’s ethnic Mexican working people to face down economic reprisals and intimidation by the Texas Rangers and successfully get out the vote.143

In short, by hiring Medrano, the Texas AFL-CIO tapped into a deep reservoir of experience and an extensive local and statewide network. Pancho was not a speechmaker, but he was extremely charismatic in meetings and was just as at ease when talking to migrant farmworkers as he was in the presence of President Johnson, whom he met in 1964. But he was not particularly good at recording his activities in writing (he had only an eighth grade education; for more on his early life, see chapter 2).\textsuperscript{144}

Still, the few surviving reports on his work as a PIO during the 1963-64 poll tax campaign provide an unmatched window into the daily work of organizing the Dallas branch of the Democratic Coalition—while also “preaching” unionism and political education to ethnic Mexicans. In his first two weeks on the job, the second half of December, Medrano met with leaders of the Machinists union, his UAW local, and the Dallas AFL-CIO Council. He also trained poll tax deputies at Lott’s Funeral Home (a black-owned business), attended a NAACP meeting sponsored by a local reverend, participated in a PASO meeting at the county courthouse, held a gathering of liberal LULACers at campaign headquarters, and joined white “Loyal Democrats” (probably “independent” liberals) for a get-together at a Tex-Mex restaurant. All but the union meetings occupied a single space on the standard PIO report form, a blank for “Contacts Made” with “Unorganized Worker Leadership.” He also reported on contacts with a representative of the Texas Employment Commission, a pair of black ministers, two ethnic Mexican “community leaders,” students at the historically-black Bishop College, and the president of the Tarrant County (Fort Worth) Precinct Workers’ Council. He held a poll tax meeting at his house near the barrio of Little Mexico in Dallas and

\textsuperscript{144} Oral history narrators universally agree on these points. See, for example, author’s interviews in San Antonio with Arnold Flores, Roy Hernandez, Paul Javior, Eddie Felán, and Hank Brown.
planned a gathering of TCV and PASO activists in Fort Worth. In the blank labeled “Comments About Your Progress,” Medrano humbly noted, “We will have more Latin poll tax deputies.” When the form asked for “suggestions as to how the state office can assist you,” Pancho wrote: “By making me a part of the coalition. Have been invited to one meeting by Latane Lambert.” He was likely referring to the statewide steering committee, although Lambert already lived in Dallas. Clearly, Medrano was already “coalitioning” at the local level.145

In fact, building the local Dallas and Forth Worth coalitions jump off Medrano’s reports, especially when they annotated to include the normally impermeable racial boundaries that he traversed so easily that they often did not merit comment. His next two weeks of activities reveal the broad spectrum of the combined Operation Bootstrap and Coalition organizing on the ground. They included (author’s annotations in brackets; most ellipses stand in for removed addressed and phone numbers):

On January 2, 1964, met with nearly all AFL-CIO Labor leaders...in Tarrant County for the Cope poll tax drive and WAD [Women’s Activities Division] program.

January 3, work and help organize Progressive Voters League of Dallas [a group of African Americans]. Resulted in 114 poll tax deputies to date...

Dallas Community Committee [an all-black or liberal interracial council] at Mooreland “Y” [the segregated black branch] attended by eight ministers and two lawyers...

UAW movies shown to a mass meeting of poll tax deputies at Lott’s Funeral Home [a hub of African American organizing]...

President Kennedy’s debate with the ministers shown at Good Street Baptist Church [probably a group of white liberals]...

Poll tax helpers met at Mrs. [Juanita] Craft’s [house; she was head of the local NAACP Youth Council and former state NAACP organizer] with Johnny Frazier from Mississippi NAACP Youth Council...

... met with North Dallas Democratic Club [white “independent” liberals and white workers]...

Coalition meeting at Mooreland “Y”, Latane Lambert president.

...

Tarrant County coalition meeting, Lenora Rollas [of TCV] president. UAW movies shown at several meetings arranged by Mrs. Rolla...

Three days of house to house contacts with helpers asking or leaving notices for poll taxes...

...

Calling stores where the Mejicano or Negro trade and if wanted we send a poll tax deputy. [sic]

All of his activities built the local coalitions, spread the gospel of unionism and political action (as Bootstrap required), and encouraged the mass registration of black and brown voters (completed the program of Project VOTE). Showing films on labor and civil rights had clearly become one of his favorite tactics, his “specialty,” as he later put it.

Attached to the report is a letter from Mrs. Rolla thanking him for appearing at the coalition meeting “on such short notice.” She gave him dated and addresses for four additional meeting, to be held in four days in four different precincts in Fort Worth, thirty-five miles from his home in Dallas. Referring to one of the “UAW movies” that Medrano had presented, she added “It is safe to assume that the Martin Luther King film will be acceptable and timely for each meeting.”146

On January 17, Medrano attended a COPE convention in Austin, and the next day he went to a meeting of the statewide Democratic Coalition. He returned to North Texas for the final push in the regular voter registration drive, spending the entire last three days in January on the “house to house poll tax drive.”

On at least one occasion, his organizing activities spilled over into a direct action protest. At some point during the campaign, Medrano, J. O. “Pepper” Garcia, VOTE project officer Julia Scott Reed, and other staff and volunteers were sitting in their downtown campaign office trying to decide what to eat for lunch. Pancho suggested that they should go to El Fenix, the city’s first Tex-Mex restaurant, located just a few blocks away. The others probably laughed; Medrano was certainly joking when he said it. They all knew that El Fenix remained a segregated holdout despite the fact that virtually all of the city’s lunch counters and restaurants had already integrated their seating. They also knew that the restaurant was the economic foundation the conservative Martinez family, a wealthy and influential group of ethnic Mexicans who curried favor with the city’s white elites by opposing civil rights militancy and supporting conservative politicians. Much like the “Westside GGL” or the remnants of the black machine on the Eastside of San Antonio, the Martinezes practiced diplomacy and stood in the way of efforts to achieve independent political power.

When they stopped laughing, Pepper Garcia suggested that they go for it; after all, El Fenix was in fact the perfect target. The multiracial group of a dozen or so local coalition activists—black, brown, and white; labor, civil rights, and political organizers—left their campaign headquarters, walked the few blocks to the restaurant, and opened the

door. They quietly took a seat at a large table toward the rear of the restaurant, not far from the hallway where the kitchen sometimes served poor *mexicanos* (blacks were refused service entirely). The manager, a member of the Martinez family, followed the lead of the segregationists of 1960: he asked them to leave and promptly closed down for the day. The restaurant did not integrate until well after the Civil Rights Act of 1964.  

In Dallas, then, as in San Antonio, Houston, and statewide, the battle lines were clearly drawn between the multiracial liberal and labor coalition and the white conservatives and their ethnic Mexican and African American allies. This brief snapshot of a single organizer’s activities over less than two months reveals the intimate ties that flourished between the Coalition’s black, brown, and white activists on the ground. While the public pronouncements of Brown, Peña, and Durham are relatively easy to find, and meeting minutes or detailed newspaper accounts are available at times, few records provide as personal a view as do the quotidian activity reports of rank and file organizers. Yet these latter documents suggests that people like Pancho Medrano, Pepper Garcia, Julia Scott, Lenora Rolla, Latane Lambert represented the key intermediate leadership that carried the Coalition and Operation Bootstrap from an Austin hotel or a convention floor to the level of the grassroots. “House-by-house, street-by-street,” as Project VOTE’s architects had put it, they gave organized local branches of the coalition that brought it to countless ordinary black, brown, and white working people across Texas.

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148 Medrano, interview by Gutierrez, CMAS 37, TV-UTA, 56-58; Author’s fieldnotes on Ricardo Medrano, Dallas, November 2, 2008; author’s interview with Robert Medrano, Dallas, September 24, 2009. Ricardo said that Julia Scott Reed wrote an article on the incident in the *Dallas Express*, the black weekly, but I have not yet located it. On the middle-class Mexican American leadership that included the Martinez family, see Carolyn Barta, “New Brown Leaders Emerge,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 19, 1972; and Gilbert Bailon, “Quiet Effort Opened Doors for Hispanics,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 15, 1987.
Medrano’s case may appear extraordinary, but it was not exceptional. In San Antonio, where Henry Muñoz served as an Operation Bootstrap PIO at the same time, the local coalition was also rolling—as it had been for at least a half-decade. Muñoz’s reports, like Medrano’s, reveal that he was also engaged in daily organizing work among a wide range of coalition partners. In his first two weeks on the job, he met with the Democratic Coalition’s leading Eastside activists: G. J. Sutton, Rev. Claude Black, Dr. Ruth Bellinger McCoy, and SNAP’s Eugene Coleman. Within a month he had made “personal contact with every [union] Business Agent, President and Secretary-Treasurer of all Locals in San Antonio.” Like Medrano, Muñoz spent much of his time pushing the poll tax campaign, working with Peña and other local elected officials, church leaders, and numerous fraternal, social, and “patriotic” associations. As the PIO for not just San Antonio but all of “South-Central Texas,” Muñoz also traveled to Austin, New Braunfels, and other nearby towns. He attended Bexar County Democratic party executive committee meetings and local Coalition gatherings—all while advancing the poll tax campaign of Project VOTE. “The Fox” also helped a group of migrant farmworkers in the sugar beet industry testify before a hearing of the U.S. Department of Labor. By the end of January, Muñoz reported that he had personally sold 1,460 poll taxes and 237 “exemptions”—“nonpaid” poll tax receipts that made the holders eligible to vote in the federal races only.149

149 Henry Muñoz, Jr., Semi-Monthly Report Forms for the following dates: December 12-31, 1963; January 1 to 15, 1964; January 15 to 31, 1964; and February 1 to February 17, 1964—all in Texas AFL-CIO MAAC, AR110-7-1-1. The “exemption” process was the state’s response to the ratification of the 24th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited poll taxes in federal elections, on January 23, 1964. Project VOTE and COPE responded by “selling” exemptions, especially after the January 31 deadline for state poll taxes. The state poll tax persisted until 1966, when the Supreme Court rule in Harper v. Virginia that state poll taxes were unconstitutional (383 U.S. 663). Texas did not ratify the 24th Amendment until 2009. See “Bexar Voting Strength at Record High,” unknown publication, n.d. [March 1964], clipping
As in Dallas, the ties between labor, civil rights, and political organizing in San Antonio remained tight. In fact, in February, the Texas AFL-CIO agreed to loan Muñoz to Albert Peña “for a week for the purpose of raising money for his filing fee and campaign” for reelection. (The fact that the Commissioner needed such assistance is itself revealing; the firebrand politico who served as co-chair of the statewide Coalition operated on a shoestring and lacked the personal wealth to even enter the race without raising money in the Westside community.)

Henry “the Fox” was also exploring new ways to extend the role of the Texas AFL-CIO and the Coalition beyond protests and political action, namely, by using his post to participate in anti-poverty initiatives. Even before he joined Operation Bootstrap, Muñoz wrote a proposal for a local coalition to secure funding under the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962. He did so in the summer of 1963, while he served as Peña’s private employee. The proposal was sponsored by the Manpower Committee of LULAC Council #2 (of which Peña was a leader), a local liberal group called the Manpower Development Council, and the “City-Wide Citizens Committee for Job Opportunities” led by Rev. Black, G. J. Sutton, and Coleman. Muñoz mentioned this proposal in his first report to Roy Evans and sent the labor leader a copy of their plans on December 27, 1963. In March, 1964, Muñoz wrote to Evans again, urging the Texas AFL-CIO to incorporate anti-poverty efforts into Operation Bootstrap. “I sincerely believe we should push real hard to start the End of ‘Poverty’ War in our border areas, the Valley and certainly amongst migrant farm workers their families,” Muñoz wrote. “This poverty war will be a key issue in the presidential election, and we should

attached to Memorandum from Henry Muñoz, Jr., to Roy R. Evans, March 7, 1964, Texas AFL-CIO MAAC, AR110-7-1-1.

capitalize on it. The MDTA proposals I drew for LULAC and Negro groups are pretty well becoming a reality.”

Muñoz’s final statements proved overly optimistic—a later report indicated that the GGL-led City Council had appointed an intermediary commission that had then stalled the proposal—but it’s clear that Henry’s passionate pleas were favorably received among labor leaders in Austin. In the summer of 1964, Muñoz sent Evans plans to expand Operation Bootstrap in collaboration with LULAC and the American GI Forum to include more PIOs who would serve “as a guiding light to making many things available under the War on Poverty Program.” He added, “We would merely be bridesmaids at this party.” He advocated partnering with all willing community organizations and seeking funding from a wide range of government agencies. “...We must help every segment of the Spanish-Speaking and Negro communities with all available means in [the] War on Poverty ...[including] unionization where possible,” he wrote in the early fall. By working with a broad range of groups, the program could “rely on the neighborhood grassroots leaders” so that “so-called leaders do not get their capricious and unreasonable ways.” Instead, “we go to the people themselves with our record of the common good.”

151 Memorandum from Henry Muñoz to Roy Evans, December 27, 1963, and enclosure, “LULAC, City-Wide Committee for Job Opportunities and Manpower Development Proposals,” 1963, Texas AFL-CIO MAAC, AR110-7-2-4; Memo from Muñoz to Evans, March 7, 1964 (quotations); 152 Letter from Muñoz to Roy R. Evans, July 6, 1964, 2 (first and second quotations); Henry Muñoz, Semi-Monthly Report Covering September 1 to September 15, 1964 (handwritten), 6 (remaining quotations)—both in Texas AFL-CIO MAAC, AR110-7-1-1. Muñoz is referring to Charles Albidress of Bexar County PASO, for whom he has complete disregard. Muñoz adds that Albidress has been vociferously attacking the Texas AFL-CIO, and that the local chapter is dying. “PASO is NOT the representative of all the Mexicanos in San Antonio,” he added. It is unclear if the chapter had defected from Peña’s fold or if Muñoz had. Certainly labor now buttered Henry’s bread. Many oral history narrators call Muñoz “an opportunist,” and his nickname was “the fox,” after all. Author’s interviews with Arnold Flores; author’s notes on conversation with José Ángel Gutiérrez.
Medrano, Muñoz, and the other three PIOs all brought the Democratic Coalition to the grassroots, contributing to Project VOTE, “preaching” unionism and political education, and building or deepening local civil rights coalitions. Their assignments went far beyond bread and butter unionism. Yet dues money paid their bills. Consequently, Brown, Evans, and the Latin American Affairs Committee had to constantly work to “sell” Operation Bootstrap, the commuter lawsuit, and other committee expenditures to the full membership of the Texas AFL-CIO. Electoral politics was one way to show their value to the larger mission of labor, as was tangible progress in terms of organizing the unorganized into unions and bringing them under collective bargaining contracts. All of the PIOs contributed to these efforts. Muñoz joined the Valley operatives in supporting liberal candidates for Congress in a pair of Democratic primary races in 1964, and in the Lower Valley, Villareal spent much of his time alongside Meat Cutters organizer Franklin Garcia waging the project’s most successful union organizing drive.  

The PIOs’ efforts on the ground and the public relations campaign within the ranks of organized labor paid off. Led by steelworker staffer and longtime PASO activist Paul Montemayor of Corpus Christi, the committee designed a glossy pamphlet showcasing the work of Operation Bootstrap, highlighting the fact that new organizing and thus new members increasingly made it self-sufficient. They circulated the flyer prior to and at their August, 1964, annual convention, which was held in Brownsville in order to bring white labor leaders from across the state to see the poverty of the border region firsthand. Delegates approved a $20,000 increase in the program’s yearly budget, bringing it to a total of $50,000. The Texas AFL-CIO soon hired Muñoz to serve as the

153 “Meeting of the Texas AFL-CIO PIO Staff,” Laredo, handwritten notes, February 26, 1964; Handwritten minutes of the Latin American Affairs Committee meeting, Laredo, February 27, 1964, 4—both in Texas AFL-CIO MAAC, AR110-7-1-1.
first director of its new Department of Equal Opportunity, and the program eventually
grew to include, in Hank Brown’s recollection, “damn near a dozen PIOs.”154

Through Operation Bootstrap, then, as through Project VOTE, organized labor
extended its commitment to the Democratic Coalition by providing it with on-the-ground
organizers. These experienced union men also engaged in civil rights, political, and even
anti-poverty activities—melding the labor movement to the longtime aspirations of the
state’s largely unorganized African American and ethnic Mexican working people. With
Hank Brown and Roy Evans at its helm, the Texas AFL-CIO ceased being a powerful
supporter of the multiracial struggle for democracy and instead became a civil rights
organization in its own right.

* * *

Like the PIOs of Operation Bootstrap, the “project officers” of VOTE dove
headlong into the poll tax campaign in December, 1963. Just before the assassination of
the President, Coalition staffer Larry Goodwyn had proposed a new poll tax program to
get underway immediately and continue until the registration deadline of January 31,
1964. He suggested that all project officers be put back on the payroll by November 25
and recommended that VOTE be expanded from sixteen cities to twenty-two urban areas,
along with two “less intensive” rural programs covering nearly 80 predominately black
and brown counties. The plan called for renewing the registrations of roughly 300,000
African Americans and ethnic Mexicans in the targeted areas and adding 325,000 new
registrants. The budget requested $98,000 for the entire campaign, but Goodwyn

154 Handwritten minutes of Latin American Affairs Committee meeting, Brownsville, July 13, 1964, and
committee pamphlet—both in Texas AFL-CIO MAAC, AR110-7-1-1; “Union Takes A Look At
‘Bootstrap,’” Brownsville Herald, July 14, 1964, 5; “AFL-CIO Authorizes Stronger Bootstraps,”
Brownsville Herald, August 21, 1964, 1; Brown, interview by author, 1:18:00 (quotation), 1:19:15.
suggested that only half of that amount was allocated from Texas—the “rest will come, if it comes at all, from out-of-state” foundations. “Organizationally, we are in the best shape ever,” he concluded, “. . . we have trained a vast army . . . we have sold the coalition at the grass roots . . . and history is on our side.”

The death of the President and the hospitalization of the Governor slowed down the launch of the new program but did not initially alter its goals. Coalition leaders came together in December and pledged their support for Johnson, who had promised to continue Kennedy’s liberal civil rights program. “Most everyone was speculating...that Don Yarborough could not feasibly oppose Gov. John Connally in 1964,” according to one report in the Texas Observer, though apparently nobody informed the former liberal candidate, who was still considering a second run. In any event, most analysts agreed that U.S. Senator Ralph Yarborough, the darling of Texas labor and liberals, would face opposition from conservative Democrats in the primary and a fierce fight in the general election if he survived. Legislative races were wide open. Coalition leaders quickly decided to continue VOTE’s planned voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives.

The plan for the program paralleled the machinery of the repeal election. African American and ethnic Mexican project officers would be hired on a full-time basis in each of the targeted cities. Operation Bootstrap PIOs would join them, and co-directors from each leg of the Coalition would oversee their work. And the precinct leaders would oversee the transformation of the “army” of blockworkers into poll tax deputies, where allowed, or trained to bring registrants to county tax sub-stations. The Team Program motivational seminars would take place in each city, followed by precinct-by-precinct

155 Letter from Goodwyn to Co-Chairmen, November 15, 1963, and enclosures.
training seminars. Then project officers would meet regularly with precinct leaders to make sure that they had recruited enough blockworkers-cum-deputies and “trained and motivated them properly.” In the final days of the regular poll tax period in late January, “every grocery store in every Democratic precinct is to be manned all day on an organized basis by voluntary poll tax deputies.” Then in February, the program would continue to seek free poll tax “exemptions” for people who failed to register but would still be permitted to vote in the federal elections.157

The blockworker program again functioned as planned, bringing total voter registrations in Texas to their highest levels ever. Although precise figures are unavailable for VOTE’s effect in its targeted areas and demographics, it is safe to say that the final tallies fell somewhat short of the lofty goals originally set by Coalition leaders. “Poll tax payments are disappointing to the liberal Democrats so far,” reported the Texas Observer on January 24, with just one week of registrations remaining. One cause, it speculated, was the assassination, which made Don Yarborough’s announced candidacy seem unfeasible. Another was that Ralph Yarborough had not yet drawn a serious conservative primary challenger. Lyman Jones of the Texas AFL-CIO told the paper “that last fall the liberal-labor coalition extended itself educating people against the poll tax, and now, in a vague sense that has real meaning at the grass roots, have to switch course and educate them for it (i.e., to pay it).” The free federal exemptions likely also hurt the number state-level poll tax receipts.158

Still, by the end of the full cycle, some 300,000 African Americans, 400,000 ethnic Mexicans, 300,000 mostly-white “union people, and indeterminate numbers of liberals...registered to vote.” The ballpark total of 700,000 non-white voters probably included exemptions and certainly encompassed countless voters untouched by Project VOTE. Yet it was impressive nonetheless. And the eighteen months of Coalition organizing and six months of sustained VOTE efforts were doubtlessly the main reasons for the huge jump. In the ten “major population areas of Texas,” all of which were targeted by VOTE projects, the total voter registration reached 1.6 million (including exemptions), more than half of the statewide total. “These same ten areas have been the target areas for every Coalition campaign in 1963-64 . . . the 1963 poll tax repeal election, the 1964 poll tax drive, and the 1964 free voter registration drive,” reported the Coalition’s Democratic Newsletter. Labor lawyer Chris Dixie observed that they did so with only $60,000, a pittance when compared to the “several millions” spent by “Northern liberals...in the old South.” The Newsletter added, “It is now time for the harvest...All of us must immediately contact the headquarters and organizations in our county and pledge to do the necessary telephone canvassing and blockwork. If the voters turn out, the real Democrats win...It is simple as that.”

Yet the prospect of harvesting the high registration numbers did not produce a clear path of action for the primaries. Soon after the filing deadline for candidates had elapsed in February 3, it became clear that the Democratic Coalition would not formally endorse any candidates. The national leaders of the UAW and the United Steelworkers

had made a deal in January with the White House that Johnson would work to prevent a conservative Democratic challenge to Sen. Ralph Yarborough if the labor leaders worked to keep the Texas AFL-CIO from endorsing Don Yarborough in the gubernatorial primary. The state federation, eager to maintain a pro-labor presence in Washington, agreed to the deal. Only an independently-wealthy conservative businessman filed to oppose the Senator, and he did so without the support of the Johnson-Connally wing of the party. Meanwhile, Albert Fuentes, the longtime PASO and Coalition activist, announced his own candidacy for Lieutenant Governor without seeking permission from anyone. His mentor, Albert Peña, faced a stiff primary fight from multiple GGL candidates in his own bid for re-election. In Austin, civil rights leader and Coalition officer Booker T. Bonner ran for the Travis County commission, while the Coalition’s Houston director and HCD activist Barbara Jordan again sought a seat in the state legislature.  

Local elections thus dominated the primary season, but the Coalition still had to sort out the two Yarboroughs. As expected, labor’s COPE refrained from endorsing a candidate in the gubernatorial race, but PASO, the TCV, and the new Texas Organization of Liberal Democrats (TOLD; composed of “independents”) all endorsed Don Yarborough. Individual union members who wanted to work for state-wide candidates “who are friendly to organized labor are encouraged to do so,” an AFL-CIO newsletter added. In a speech at the TCV convention, Hank Brown “reaffirmed his confidence in the Democratic Coalition,” reported the Observer’s Ronnie Dugger. “In the Coalition, he said, they had been able to disagree but continue meeting and working together...”

Brown added, “I know we disappointed you at [the COPE convention in] Arlington... I might say I myself have moments of disappointment... But in the making of the Coalition we have the foundation” for the future, including potentially Fuentes in the lieutenant governor’s seat that year. Brown added that the state federation had recently hired an African American PIO in East Texas and was about to hire another. “You talk about civil rights. The right to have a union...the right to have decent wages,’ these are rights too,” Brown said. At least half a million black and ethnic Mexican workers earned less than 75 cents per hour, he added, and labor had to prioritize the Senate race in order to get better federal labor policies.\(^\text{161}\)

But the indignant memories of Connally’s stand on civil rights were too raw for the Coalition’s black and brown legs. W. J. Durham, who stood alongside Bonner and the San Antonio activists when they were rebuffed from the Governor’s office said, in Dugger’s words, that “he wants a governor who will see him just as he would any other visitor.” Peña recalled that Connally attacked him as “Boss Peña...because I believe in the dignity of all men” and in their rights to “have a decent job at an adequate wage, to eat at the places they want to eat at, and go to the shows they want to see.” Franklin Jones of Marshall, the head of TOLD, offered his own fiery speech against the Governor.\(^\text{162}\)

The Senate race was much simpler for the Coalition. Whereas many African Americans and ethnic Mexicans had quibbled with Ralph Yarborough in previous years, the Senator’s explicit support for the Crystal City uprising and tacit endorsement of the August, 1963, marches on Austin and Washington had eased their concerns. At the same

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TCV endorsement convention in March, 1964, Yarborough made his first public address before a “Negro political convention” and “made his support of civil rights legislation abundantly clear.” He read a passionate, integrationist letter from one his white constituents that also, in the words of an unnamed Observer reporter, “embodied the evolution of this East Texas native from a segregationist in the ways of his home people into a representative of the present times.” Yarborough noted that he had voted in the commerce committee to advance the public accommodations portion of the civil rights package and in the labor committee in favor of a fair employment practices act. TCV delegates, including Moses and Erma Leroy, Rev. Black, G.J. Sutton, and Dallas’s Juanita Craft (and probably B.T. Bonner), voted to endorse Yarborough, becoming the fourth and final Coalition leg to do so.163

The Coalition thus rallied around getting out the vote for Senator Yarborough and local races in the primary and the straight Democratic ticket in the fall. Without VOTE and an official labor endorsement, PASO, the TCV, and other black and brown groups lacked the ability to run a statewide campaign against the wildly popular Governor. Don Yarborough lost to Connally by a 3-to-1 margin, carrying only 5 out of 254 counties, and Fuentes also went down a lopsided defeat. Peña held his seat, as did the Bexar County legislative delegation. Other liberal candidates in Houston and Dallas suffered heavy losses, but VOTE’s Barbara Jordan made “a strong showing.” B.T. Bonner again lost his bid for county commissioner. VOTE co-director Latane Lambert of Dallas, project officer Lenora Rolla from the TCV in Fort Worth, and Gus Garcia from PASO all joined Senator Yarborough’s campaign staff for the primary. The Senator cruised to victory. In

the fall, as all four legs of the Coalition rallied around “LBJ – HHH – RWY ... the Straight Democratic Ticket.” Lambert went to work in Johnson headquarters while coordinating the Coalition’s newest get-out-the-vote drive. Renato Cuellar of the Lower Valley PASO, who had run unsuccessfully for Sheriff in Hidalgo County, served “as the Mexican-American staff man on the Coalition program.” Rolla, an African American, and Martin Wiginton, a white liberal who replaced Goodwyn as executive director in late June, rounded out the leadership.164

More importantly, the Coalition revived its campaign on the ground. Polls showed the Democratic candidates leading their Republican opponents by margins of approximately 60-to-40 percent, as the extremism of GOP presidential nominee Barry Goldwater and the familiarity of Johnson seemed to guarantee that the President would carry the state. Yet Coalition leaders urged its supporters to not grow complacent. “A tragic defeat is ahead if Texans let the political polls put them to sleep. Remember . . . polls only show how voters would vote if they all go to the trouble of voting . . . polls do not show how many voters will turn out on election day.”165

The four get-out-the-vote coordinators had far fewer resources and even less time than VOTE had at its disposal in the repeal election a year before. The Coalition, which had always operated on a shoestring, was again near-broke by early July. Wiginton promised to raise funds for the project, but it is unclear whether he was successful. Few of the local project officers from the poll tax campaigns remained the local coordinators

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of the effort by October, though many veteran activists continued to serve in that capacity. Presumably, some of the new names were former precinct leaders who had been promoted. Yet in some cases the project officers were recognizable veteran white liberals, a stark contrast to the virtually all-black or brown local leaders who coordinated the 1963 repeal referendum (some African Americans and ethnic Mexicans may have joined the local staff of the official campaigns). In any event, with just weeks to go before the election, the number of volunteer blockworkers had stalled at 9,000, and another 5,000 were still needed to reach their goal of turning out the occupants of 350,000 households (at the rate of 25 homes for each worker to contact 500,000 voters overall). “We may lose without more volunteers,” the Newsletter cautioned. It called for each reader to recruit two new blockworkers: “You should contact every possible friend, relative and neighbor and ask them to volunteer...”

“New Power for the Texas Minorities,” read a page three headline in the Texas Observer immediately after the election. “Aroused probably in large part by the racial demonstrations of the last three years and afforded clearly outlined friends and enemies by the stands public figures took on the civil rights law, more Negroes registered, and then those who were registered voted in higher proportions that they did in 1960,” the article surmised. “This was a backlash,” declared liberal TOLD leader Franklin Jones. While Kennedy had carried about three-fourths of the votes among the state’s “two big minorities,” Johnson and Yarborough won 95% of their votes. “In dense racial ghettos in the big cities,” the numbers were 98% and 99%, respectively. Yet the Coalition’s and federal candidates’ combined “straight ticket” strategy—designed to speed up the lines at

the polls—also carried conservative Democrats to victory. Connally won by a margin of 1.2 million votes, while Johnson led Goldwater by 700,000 and Yarborough defeated Houston oil man George H. Bush by 330,000. “Minority precincts” in which the Coalition’s blockworker program was active voted for Yarborough 24-to-1, and Johnson’s edge was nearly that high. In Dallas, 32,000 African Americans voted, up from 11,000 in 1962 (an off-year) and a 40% increase in turnout among black registered voters. In Bexar County, “in the 43 Latin-American precincts” worked by Peña and the Coalition on the Westside, Yarborough won by 24,000 votes. In the “14 Negro precincts” on the Eastside, G. J. Sutton’s Coalition-affiliated apparatus delivered a margin of 10,000. Yarborough carried the entire county by only 29,000 votes. In Houston, the Coalition increased African American turnout in 37 precincts from 40,000 in 1960 to 53,000 in 1964. “The minorities were a decisive factor in Sen. Yarborough’s victory,” the piece concluded.167

Kennedy’s assassination then, did not derail the ultimate goal of many Democratic Coalition leaders who sought to build independent political power for the state’s African American and ethnic Mexican residents. Nor did it deal a fatal blow to the cohesion of the Coalition. But the tragedy did limit the Coalition’s two-year-long goal of landing one of its candidates in the governor’s mansion. The UPO was all but dead, but the conservative blacks (and browns) who supported Connally remained a threat to liberal activists who sought to extend their influence.

Yarborough’s victory was a significant triumph that reelected the longtime standard-bearer of the liberal movement in Texas. Yet it was not immediately

accompanied by significant gains for black and brown candidates in local and state legislature offices. Activists now needed to regroup and continue organizing at the local level.

**Conclusion**

From Crystal City to the “Freedom Now” march in Austin and up through the general election of 1964, black, brown, and white activists came together in a deliberate, democratic manner in order to change their world. Their route was circuitous, and at every stage they encountered opposition from members of their own ethnic groups as well as their white elite antagonists. But they stuck together when it mattered and demanded that a place in Texas politics. In the end, the assassination pulled the rug pulled out from under them, but the multiracial liberal coalition still managed to assert its power and win a statewide race.

More importantly, participation in the Democratic Coalition, Operation Bootstrap, and other local civil rights efforts across the state transformed the activists themselves. Project VOTE’s unprecedented “blockworker” program altered the political landscape of Texas by finding thousands of local volunteers and transforming them into effective political organizers. The activists who organized them likewise learned how to build local coalitions. Their trials by fire would continue to serve them in the years ahead.
Conclusion

Epilogue: Winning and Losing

At a meeting of Democratic Coalition co-chairmen in May, 1964, the group’s leaders tentatively approved a plan for the next year. It called for “(1) forming local coalitions, (2) building precinct organizations, and (3) conducting an issues information program on the issues basic to the Coalition...”¹ Of course, each of these initiatives was already well underway. VOTE’s three poll tax campaigns and the get-out-the-vote effort in the fall of 1964 all contributed to the formation or strengthening of local multiracial alliances and the expansion of precinct- and neighborhood-level community organizing. Civil rights, expansively defined, had long been the four groups’ primary “issue,” and it would remain so in the coming years.

In other words, the statewide Coalition was already playing catch-up as its local affiliates expanded and improved their individual operations. In Dallas, Pancho Medrano, Julia Scott, and Latane Lambert were fast building a powerful multiracial alliance. In Houston, the LeRoys, the TCV, and the liberal wing of the HCCO joined with the white liberal HCD, the local chapter of PASO, and the Harris County AFL-CIO. And in San Antonio, where the local coalition had in many ways produced the statewide effort, Peña, Sutton, and local labor leaders continued to deepen their collaborative efforts.

The shift toward focusing on local coalition organizing, already underway in 1964, became the dominant activity of black, brown, and white activists in the coming years. Their efforts paid off in a variety of ways at the local level. Some veteran activists

¹ Letter from Martin Wiginton to “Project Officer,” October 12, 1963, 2, Lambert Papers, AR127-3-6.
themselves became elected officials, while others served in appointive capacities in the War on Poverty and other local boards and commissions. Countless ordinary people were themselves transformed over the years by participating as the rank and file of local political campaigns, civil rights demonstrations, and labor struggles. In short, they won—they achieved a degree of independent political power that was unimaginable in the darkest days of Jim Crow.

Yet they also lost. The statewide Democratic Coalition quietly faded away after Yarborough’s victory in the general election of 1964—the last time a liberal integrationist candidate won a statewide race (for two decades, at least). The multiracial activists who gradually were gaining local power failed to elect a liberal governor, though they did make some progress in the state legislature. A handful of new laws, commission hearings, and court decisions got the proverbial boot off the necks of the state’s black and brown residents, but the long-anticipated multiracial liberal majority never materialized. Veteran activists were then forced to confront the limits of their newfound local power.

Efforts to revive the Democratic Coalition popped up intermittently, but no coordinated effort that matched the scale and success of VOTE again emerged. Less formal, less permanent partnerships did continue to connect the state’s African American, ethnic Mexican, and white liberal and labor leadership. But statewide power remained elusive.

* * *

The last hurrah of the statewide coalition occurred in 1966. It began in the Valley when several hundred migrant farmworkers struck the melon harvest at La Casita Farms near Rio Grande City, in Starr County. Eugene Nelson, a Texas native who worked for
the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) in California, asked
permission to be re-assigned to his home state and returned in March of that year. He
made a tour of local unions in Houston to raise a few dollars and then headed west
toward the fields. He connected with Margil Sanchez, a local resident who had long
sought to unionize the area’s farmworkers, and on June 1, the UFWOC’s new members
began what they called “la huelga (the strike).” The growers responded in typical South
Texas fashion: by calling in the Texas Rangers to intimidate the strikers and hiring scabs
from the other side of the Rio Grande.  

UFWOC Vice President Gilbert Padilla and organizers Antonio Orendain and Bill
Chandler soon arrived to help Nelson and Sanchez steer the conflict. Dolores Huerta, the
union’s second in command after César Chávez, briefly joined them, as did Pancho
Medrano, who had joined the international staff of the UAW right after Operation

2 The following sections draw on a variety of primary and secondary sources, especially the author’s oral
history interviews with the organizers. See Gilbert Padilla, interview by author, Fresno, California,
September 12, 2009; Bill Chandler, interview by author, Jackson, Mississippi, February 5, 2010; Dolores
Huerta, interview by author, Durham, North Carolina, January 17, 2010; State Senator (fmr.) Joe Bernal,
interview by author, San Antonio, September 1, 2009; Booker T. Bonner, interviews by author, Houston,
May 11 and 12, 2010; and DVDs of Fortieth Anniversary Reunion of Rio Grande City UFW Activists,
2006, copies in author’s possession, courtesy Bill Chandler. Also see Pancho Medrano, interview by
George N. Green, TLA-UTA; Francisco F. “Pancho” Medrano, interview by José Ángel Gutiérrez, TV-
UTA; Henry Muñoz, interview by George N. Green and Carr Winn, TLA-UTA; Erasmo and Sally Andrade
Papers, BLAC, Boxes 8 and 9; Pancho Medrano Papers, AR55, TLA-UTA; Mexican American Farm
Workers Collection, AR408; Migrant Farm Workers Organizing Movement Collection, AR46; Moses
LeRoy Papers, HMRC; J.A. “Tony” Alvarez Collection, HMRC; Alfred J. Hernandez Papers, HMRC; John
Castillo Papers, HMRC; U.S. Senate Committee on Labor, Sub-Committee on Migratory Labor, Hearings,
to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, “The Administration of Justice in Starr, Nueces, and San Patricio
605; Allee v. Medrano, 416 U.S. 802 (U.S. Supreme Court, 1974); and Judge Woodrow Seals Papers,
HMRC. Secondary sources include Mary Margaret McAllen Amberson, “‘Better to Die on our Feet, than
to Live on Our Knees’: United Farm Workers and Strikes in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 1966-1967,”
Journal of South Texas 20, no. 1 (2007): 56-103; Timothy P. Bowman, “From Workers to Activists: The
UFW in Texas’ Lower Rio Grande Valley,” Journal of the West 47, no. 3 (2008): 87-94; and Robert E.
Hall, “Pickets, Politics, and Power: The Farm Worker Strike in Starr County,” 2007, Chandler Davidson
Texas Politics Research Collection, Woosden Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University, Box 12,
Folder 7, later published in Texas Law Review; 3. See also Brian D. Behnken, Fighting Their Own Battles:
Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas (Chapel Hill: University
Bootstrap and now delivered substantial donations from the auto workers’ union to “la causa” (the cause). The farmworkers stayed out on strike, despite constant harassment and intimidation from the growers and the Rangers. One small farmer, an ethnic Mexican, agreed to recognize the union and was promptly blacklisted from the growers’ association and cut off from its supply chains and shipping and marketing routes. To turn away the scabs, the union staged pickets on the international bridge in the small town of Roma, where they were briefly joined by a sympathy picket staged by the Mexican CTM. When that failed, Padilla, Orendain, and Chandler surreptitiously padlocked shut the bridge’s gate, illegally closing the port of entry for the better part of a day. Peña and other liberal Mexicanos in San Antonio, led by Erasmo Andrade, organized caravans to bring food and supplies to the farmworkers, but the strike dragged on with no signs of a resolution. A delegation of Bexar County legislators—all liberals elected by the local coalition—visited Rio Grande City to investigate the strikers’ charges of abuse by the Rangers. State Senator-elect Joe Bernal, who had recently defected from the GGL, became radicalized experientially when Captain A. Y. Allee personally threatened him and pushed him around.

On the Fourth of July, UFWOC organizers and hundreds of striking workers launched a march to bring attention to what had clearly become a protracted fight. They planned to march to the capitol in Austin, but they started out on a circuitous route in order to build public support for their campaign. The Houston and San Antonio PASO chapters sent delegations to join the first day of the march, and PASO leaders in the Lower Rio Grande Valley helped coordinate rallies in each city and hamlet along their way. One PASO member who rode the bus from Houston was Moses LeRoy, the veteran
black civil rights unionist. Now nearly 70 years old, LeRoy walked every leg of the 500-mile march. The strikers headed southeast down the Valley as far as Harlingen before turning north toward Corpus Christi. By the time it arrived there, the march had gained enough momentum that even Dr. Hector Garcia, the founder of the G.I. Forum who had long opposed demonstrations and led the fight against the Teamsters partnership with PASO, joined the UFWOC in the streets. A pair of ethnic Mexican Houston ministers and San Antonio’s Father Sherrill Smith joined “la marcha,” as the strikers called the march, giving a degree of moral and religious legitimacy to the cause. Still, many local churches along the way, whose leaders feared retaliation by the growers and the area’s political and economic elites, refused to offer the marchers shelter, food, or even water. Even Catholic priests took this stand, ignoring the fact that most of the marchers were members of the same Archdiocese.

As the march wound its way toward San Antonio and eventually Austin, another civil rights struggle was bubbling over in East Texas. A year earlier, in 1965, B. T. Bonner, the longtime civil rights leader in Austin, had organized black high school and college students to desegregate the city of Huntsville—after year after the passage of the Civil Rights Act. With support from Texas labor and liberals as well as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), he formed Huntsville Action for You (HA-YOU; pronounced “Hey, you!”) and led a series of sit-ins at local restaurants and marches around the county courthouse. In 1966, Bonner returned to Huntsville to lead a fight for school integration and economic opportunity, the latter a part of SCLC’s Operation Breadbasket program. In August, when local elites refused to accept HA-YOU’s demands for jobs, Bonner led the youth organization on a protest march to the
capitol. Like the ethnic Mexicans in the UFWOC, the African Americans led by Bonner planned a circuitous route to highlight ongoing segregation and economic misery facing blacks in East Texas. Bonner coordinated his march along with UFWOC and Texas AFL-CIO leaders, planning to rendezvous at the capitol on Labor Day, September 5, 1966.

All three groups—blacks from East Texas, browns from South Texas (and LeRoy), and the white leaders of organized labor—united under a common demand: the establishment of a $1.25 minimum hourly wage. Echoing the calls from 1963 protests, they demanded a meeting with Governor Connally when the march arrived in Austin. Their longtime nemesis again stated that he would not be bullied by demonstrators, and he refused to meet with them under duress. It appeared that the Governor would simply ignore the coalition’s demands. But on the last day of August, Connally jumped in his limousine and sped southward, accompanied by Attorney General Waggoner Carr and state House Speaker Ben Barnes and trailed in another vehicle by Hank Brown. The Governor found the marchers on the highway just outside New Braunfels, about halfway between San Antonio and Austin. Strike leaders and the state officials met briefly on the side of the road, under the hot sun. Connally asked them to call off the demonstration but refused to promise a minimum wage bill. The confrontation ended in stalemate, and the march continued.

In the morning on Labor Day, a multiracial group of ten thousand protestors from across the state joined the strikers at St. Edward’s University in South Austin, where they had spent the previous night. Urged by Brown and the Texas AFL-CIO, black, brown, and white union members from across the state joined the march en masse. Even the
relatively conservative Dallas labor council sent a delegation, which likely included the Lamberts. Houston PASO chartered several more buses and brought members of that city’s local coalition. Moses LeRoy remained in the group, and he was joined by white and black activists from the HCD. One was Barbara Jordan, a longtime blockworker for the coalition, had recently been elected to the State Senate—the first African American in that body since Reconstruction and its first black woman. Alfred Hernandez, the national president of LULAC, became that group’s first leader to endorse direct action protests and personally joined the march, as did other formerly conservative ethnic Mexicans. George Sanchez, the sagacious professor, also participated, smiling from ear to ear. San Antonio sent countless activists from the Westside and almost surely several from the Eastside. Finally, B.T. Bonner brought a group of several hundred HA-YOU members and supporters who marched together and added a sizable African American presence.

The marchers walked three miles up Congress Ave and arrived at the capitol in high spirits. Senator Ralph Yarborough, Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez, Barbara Jordan, Joe Bernal, four other state senators, and fourteen state representatives joined them in rallying for a minimum wage. Yarborough, the liberal standard-bearer and highest ranking official elected by the state’s multiracial coalition, electrified the crowd with his speech. “One hundred years ago, we ended physical slavery,” he said, seamlessly linking the black and brown civil rights struggles. “Today we are here to end poverty and economic slavery.” Hank Brown also addressed the marchers, commenting that he had “never seen as much unity among Mexican-Americans as I see at this hour in Texas.”
Brown could have added that the state had never seen a demonstration of that size, nor had it ever seen so clearly the fruits of decades of black and brown civil rights organizing and coalition building. Jordan and Bernal announced that they would introduce a minimum wage bill and pull out all the stops to get it passed. Thanks to the activities of local coalitions in the state’s big cities and the Valley, the 1967 legislature would be the most diverse and one of the most liberal in its history. Hank Brown later recalled that it was labor’s most productive session in its history, thanks to the presence of black, brown, and white liberals and his own ability to make deals between them and speaker Ben Barnes.

The minimum wage march represented the high point and culmination of the long, multiracial struggle for democracy. It brought decades of underground organizing into public view. It did not result in an immediate victory for strikers nor a long-term rejuvenation of the statewide Democratic Coalition. But it did further the process whereby veteran activists continued to gain power through local multiracial alliances.

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The strike continued into the next year, reaching a fever pitch as the 1967 harvest approached. Local law enforcement and Texas Rangers resumed their harassment, beating, jailing, and intimidation of the strikers and their sympathizers. In late May, the Rangers attacked a group of UFWOC organizers and members who picketed the Mo-Pac railroad in an attempt to convince unionized train conductors and freight handlers to refuse the produce being harvested by scabs. One of the pickets was Pancho Medrano, who attempted to photograph the ongoing police brutality. He was promptly arrested. On June 1, the Rangers beat two union leaders nearly to death. In two months, hundreds
of farmworkers had been jailed, roughed up, and harassed. The police violence re-focused external attention on the conflict, and the U.S. Senate Sub-Committee on Migrant Labor responded by holding widely-publicized hearings at the Starr County Courthouse in July. Ralph Yarborough, Edward M. “Ted” Kennedy of Massachusetts, and Harrison Williams of New Jersey called numerous witnesses to the stand, including growers, but mostly the event served as an opportunity for the abused farmworkers to finally speak their piece before a national audience. Union members and PASO activists from across South Texas flocked to the hearings, and UFWOC’s farmworkers packed the gallery. The crowd frequently grew raucous and interrupted the proceedings with cheers and jeers, including chants of “Viva Kennedy” to thank Ted when he spoke out in support of the strikers.

Around the same time, the Texas State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights held a hearing on the strike and other instances of police brutality in South Texas. The state committee included several labor appointments, a diverse group of battle-hardened former Coalition leaders. Latane Lambert had served on the committee since 1962, and Erma LeRoy and Henry Muñoz soon joined her. Paul Montemayor of PASO and the Latin American Affairs Committee was a key witness. The committee published a scathing report titled “The Administration of Justice in Starr, San Patricio, and Nueces Counties,” which was then forwarded to the full federal commission for review. The state body later investigated charges of employment discrimination at San Antonio’s Kelly Air Force Base and other locales across the state. Muñoz recalled that he often brought the complaints that he received as director of Texas
AFL-CIO Department of Equal Opportunity to the advisory committee, which in turn launched inquiries after receiving numerous leads from the same worksite or community.

With assistance from the UAW, the UFWOC also filed a federal court case against the Texas Rangers. The case, named Medrano v. Allee after its lead plaintiff and the captain of the state police force, eventually reached the U.S. Supreme Court. The verdict stripped the Rangers of enforcement powers and struck down many of the state’s draconian labor laws, including the O’Daniel Act that defined mass picketing as more than two people.

These three federal interventions, themselves the products of coalition organizing, collectively amounted to a sort of Third Reconstruction. While African Americans had been emancipated after the Civil War, ethnic Mexicans still felt the sting of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, and its frequent violations thereafter. The Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts had helped their own fight against the South Texas version of Jim Crow, but both federal laws initially targeted blacks. Curtailing the autocratic power of the growers and the capricious violence of the Texas Rangers represented a new beginning.

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The farmworker struggle provided a shot in the arm to veteran ethnic Mexican organizers and undergirded the rising Chicano youth movement. A handful of older activists like Albert Peña had long played a role in local governance, but outside of South Texas formal politics had remained largely black and white.

In the wake of la marcha, black, brown, and white activists in Houston and Dallas redoubled their local coalition-building efforts, as did Peña and company in San Antonio.
The results were tangible: in each city, longtime organizers finally made progress toward their decades-old goal of independent political power. Activists worked to implement the Voting Rights Act of 1965 on the ground, and many were involved in lawsuits that replaced the old at-large electoral system with single-member, “majority-minority” districts. Some activists won elections to local office, others were appointed to local boards and commissions, and others became local government administrators. For the first time, public policy-making in urban Texas included independent voices from the state’s long-disenfranchised black, brown, and poor communities. And many of the barriers to economic self-improvement also came tumbling down.

In Houston, for example, a local multiracial coalition seized control of the city’s delegation to the state legislature, several Congressional districts, and much of municipal politics. In 1965, responding to the *Baker v. Carr* Supreme Court decision, the Texas legislature reapportioned the state’s electoral map, creating several new single-member districts in Harris County. The following spring, the local coalition composed of the HCD, HCCO, PASO, the Harris County AFL-CIO, and the Teamsters formed a slate that included blockwalker director Barbara Jordan, former sit-in demonstrator Curtis Graves, and PASO activist Lauro Cruz. The slate swept its way into office. Jordan was later elected to Congress. Houston PASO became the state’s most vibrant chapter and continued to function into the late 1970s, as did variants of the coalition. One of its leaders, Leonel Castillo, who had organized the SCL sit-in demonstrators in San Antonio.

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3 See Moses LeRoy Papers, HMRC; LeRoy interview by Chandler Davidson; John Castillo Papers, HMRC; Leonel J. Castillo Papers, HMRC; Ben T. Reyes Papers, HMRC; Bill Chandler, interview by author; Bob Hall, interviews by author; Booker T. Bonner, interviews by author; Howard Middleton, interviews by author; David T. Lopez, interviews by author, Houston, May 18 and 28, 2010; State Senator Rodney Ellis, interview by author, Houston, May 27, 2010; John Castillo, interview by José Ángel Gutiérrez, TV-UTA; Leonel Castillo, interview by José Ángel Gutiérrez, TV-UTA; Lauro Cruz, interview by José Ángel Gutiérrez, TV-UTA; John Castillo, interview by Thomas Kreene, Houston, December 6, 1985, Oral History Collection, HMRC.
while in college, became the county treasurer and later the director of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service under President Carter.

At the local level, Moses LeRoy ran for a seat on the Model (Cities) Neighborhood Residents Commission, and once elected, he became the first chairman of that body. The position gave him a platform to criticize inaction by Houston’s anti-poverty administrators even as he continued his neighborhood-based electoral organizing. Almost immediately after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, LeRoy filed a complaint that finally ended employment discrimination at the Southern Pacific Railroad and forced the integration of his workplace and union Brotherhood—winning battles that he had been fighting intermittently since the early 1940s. In 1973, LeRoy filed a suit under the Voting Rights Act that challenged the city’s at-large electoral system. Many black and ethnic Mexican civil rights groups endorsed and funded the litigation, but LeRoy’s name appeared first on the docket, and his personal commitment to the case is often credited with helping it survive years of legal wrangling. In 1979, Houston voters approved a mixed plan that created nine single-member city council districts, a change that finally allowed African Americans and ethnic Mexicans in the inner city to independently elect council representatives from their neighborhoods. (LeRoy’s sometimes antagonist, Howard Middleton of the Laborers, continued to work through a more conservative coalition, a strategy that resulted in his appointment as the county’s first Manpower Commissioner.)

In Dallas, Pancho Medrano used his position with the UAW to build a powerful neighborhood electoral machine that helped democratize Dallas politics.⁴ After his work

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⁴ See Medrano Papers, TLA-UTA; Medrano, interview by José Ángel Gutiérrez, TV-UTA; Medrano, interview by George Green, TLA-UTA; Ricardo Medrano, interview by author, Dallas, September 23,
to expand the local coalition through Operation Bootstrap, Pancho began working for the UAW international union’s Citizenship Department, a job that gave him carte blanche to travel the country assisting local civil rights struggles and political candidates “wherever it was needed.” Medrano strategically used his position to spread the gospel of community organizing. From rural New Mexico to small towns in West Texas, from the borderlands of the Rio Grande Valley to the piney woods black belt of East Texas, Medrano criss-crossed the countryside in a car filled with leaflets and a film projector. He made connections with local chapters of LULAC, the G.I. Forum, and the NAACP and joined the campaigns of countless senators, congressmen, and state legislators throughout the West. As noted in the Introduction, in towns where he had no local contacts, he found a white wall in a poor neighborhood and began projecting movies, often popular feature films with no political content. Once the crowd grew around him, Pancho introduced his audiences to the possibility of making change through electoral politics. At every stop on his journeys, he recruited precinct captains, talked up the benefits of trade unionism, and highlighted the critical links between labor, civil rights, and political activism. He also personally in many of the iconic events of the 1960s, including the voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in March, 1965; the multiracial Poor People’s Campaign encampment in May, 1968; and the Chicano Moratorium demonstrations against the Vietnam War in Los Angeles in 1970.

Yet Medrano also continued to organize in his own Dallas neighborhood, using it as a base for deepening the local multiracial coalition. In 1964, Pancho helped his son Ricardo purchase a small neighborhood grocery store around the corner from their house. The store sold some food and other conveniences, but its main business was performing the functions of a community center. Pancho’s wife, Esperanza, offered informal day care services in a back room, and Kiko’s bustled with children each day after school. The kids attracted the parents to the store, and Ricardo took advantage of their presence to provide them with political education materials. Another one of Pancho’s sons, Robert, became the first in the family to attend college. After graduation, he took a job in the War on Poverty and eventually advanced to the position of director at the West Dallas Community Center. Just as Ricardo used Kiko’s as an informational clearinghouse, Robert made the provision of social services part of a broader project of political education and community organizing. Together, the two political hubs brought the Medrano family into direct contact with countless barrio residents.

Over the course of the 1970s, this sustained contact transformed into mass mobilization. In late February 1971, Dallas city, county, and surrounding law enforcement agencies conducted a general reign of terror in the barrios, ostensibly seeking the murderers of three slain sheriff’s deputies. One of their attacks, on a man named Tomás Rodríguez, galvanized the city’s growing Chicano movement and heralded a new peak for the city’s multiracial civil rights coalition. The Medranos stood at the center of this new city-wide mobilization. Police brutality was also a chronic problem in the black neighborhoods of South Dallas, but common grievances did not automatically produce cooperation across ethnic lines. Rather, Pancho and his family drew upon
decades of contact with black civil rights activists to begin organizing a partnership immediately after the Rodriguez assault and arrest. Pancho had served on the board of the local NAACP; his children grew up in the Association’s youth chapter led by renowned activist Juanita Craft. He had collected poll taxes and registered black Dallasites while serving on the board of the Texas Council of Voters, and he was now participating in the long shot mayoral candidacy of black community organizer Al Lipscomb.

Beginning at Kiko’s and the West Dallas Community Center, the Medranos connected student leaders of all races to barrio residents and reached out to a wide range of established Mexican American, Chicano, and African American civil rights organizations. In March, 1971, the coalition took to the streets in a series of marches and demonstrations. Pancho spoke at most of the rallies, as did Lipscomb and Rev. Peter Johnson, who was engaged in organizing the black neighborhoods of South Dallas in a campaign for job opportunities and an end to hunger. Photographs of the rallies show ethnic Mexican protestors lifting placards reading “Lipscomb for Mayor” alongside posters of the UFWOC eagle.

Like Moses LeRoy, Medrano also extended the struggle for access to skilled jobs back at his old worksite, the Grand Prairie aircraft plant formerly known as North American Aviation. Even after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, shop foremen and white union officials continued to resist integration, so Medrano helped the African American workers organize independently of local union leadership in order to demand (and gain) access to skilled, mechanized jobs. At the same time, Pancho also worked with the Texas Employment Commission to bring over five hundred ethnic
Mexican skilled workers north from the Rio Grande Valley and into a new training program at the plant—finally desegregating it nearly twenty-five years after the wartime FEPC first promised to do so.

Each of these organizing efforts allowed Pancho and his family to build what his son Ricardo called “political clout.” Many of the Medrano children, who had been at Pancho’s side in various campaigns throughout the fifties and sixties, became local leaders in their own right. In 1974, Robert ran for and won a seat on the Dallas Independent School District board, a post he held until 1988. As in Houston, the creation of single-member city council districts required a lawsuit; in Dallas, former mayoral candidate and coalition partner Al Lipscomb led the Voting Rights Act case. The new black and brown districts the suit created allowed both Lipscomb and Ricardo Medrano to win seats on the council in the early 1980s. In 2010, Pancho’s youngest, daughter Pauline, became the city’s Deputy Mayor Pro Tem.

Finally, in San Antonio, the state’s original local coalition also continued to grow deeper and more powerful.5 Albert Peña became a mentor and ally to younger Chicano activists, who fanned out across South Texas under the banner of La Raza Unida (The United People’s) party. He also remained an officer and intermittent chair of PASO into the 1970s. At the local level, he helped organize the Federation for the Advancement of

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5 Arnold Flores, interviews by author, San Antonio, October 18, 2008; September 1 and 9, 2009; March 11, 2010; Peña interview by José Ángel Gutiérrez, TV-UTA; Peña Papers, UTSA-ITC; Erasmo and Sally Andrade Papers, BLAC; José Ángel Gutiérrez, Albert A. Peña, Jr.: Dean Emeritus of Chicano Politics (under contract with Texas A&M University Press); Joe Bernal, interview by author; Eugene Coleman, interview by author; Rev. Claude Black, interview by author; C. J. Littlefield, interview by author, San Antonio, September 2, 2009; ; G. J. Sutton and Lou Nelle Sutton folders, SAPL-VF; Roberto de Leon, interview by author, San Antonio, September 3, 2009; Rosie Castro, interview by author, San Antonio, September 8, 2009; Roy Hernandez, interview by author, San Antonio, September 8, 2009; Paul Javier, interviews by author; Eddie Felan, interview by author, San Antonio, March 23, 2010; Jaime Martinez, interview by author, San Antonio, March 10, 2010; Richard A. Twedell Papers, TLA-UTA; Samuel A. Twedell Papers, TLA-UTA; Texas State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, “Employment Discrimination at Kelly Air Force Base,” copy in Joe J. Bernal Papers, BLAC.
the Mexican American (FAMA), a group that coordinated aid caravans to Valley farmworkers and helped lead the multiracial fight to desegregate employment opportunities at Kelly Air Force Base. In 1968, Peña helped co-found a local intra-ethnic alliance called the Mexican American Unity Council as well as the regional Southwest Council of La Raza, the predecessor to today’s National Council of La Raza. In 1974, he joined Chicano activists in creating the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project, which helped ethnic Mexican communities throughout the region organize politically. Peña also grew closer to organized labor, serving as the director of a UAW community unionism project in the early 1970s.

Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, Peña and Eastside activists continued to collaborate on anti-poverty and community development initiatives, and to support one another in electoral politics and civil rights demonstrations. They formed a “lunch bunch” that met at least monthly to coordinate their ongoing organizing activities. As in the other cities, the local coalition produced more electoral victories. In 1972, G. J. Sutton won a seat in the state legislature. The following year, Rev. Claude Black was elected to the city council on his third try, becoming the first independent African American to do so. Conservative ethnic Mexicans defeated both Peña and Joe Bernal in 1972, but both remained active in neighborhood organizing and the local coalition. Peña later became a municipal court judge.

Ethnic Mexicans and African Americans slowly gained entry into the city’s labor movement. A caucus known as San Antonio Chicano Organizers (SACO) coordinated the activities of more than a dozen organizers, including the staff of Peña’s UAW project, Franklin Garcia of the Meat Cutters, and several IUE organizers that worked under the
direction of Paul Javior, the Polish farmer turned organizer and the “token Anglo” of the
group. In 1967, Javior recruited Clarence “C. J.” Littlefield, a protégé of Black, Sutton,
and Coleman who grew up in the city’s civil rights movement, to serve as the city’s first
black union president. SACO served as another leg of the local coalition, getting out the
vote for independent black and brown and extending the veteran activists’ influence on
the ground—just as Operation Bootstrap had supported community organizing since
1963.

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In sum, through local coalition organizing, veteran black, brown, and white
activists made significant headway toward their longtime goals of independent political
power and economic opportunity. They won unprecedented amounts of formal influence,
and their various delegations to Austin at times produced significant legislative
improvements.

Yet they quickly realized that they had won the battles even as they lost the war. National politics turned decisively to the right by the late 1960s, eliminating many of the
federal resources that had supported the Second and Third Reconstructions in Texas. At
the state level, the conservative Democrats hung on much longer than the liberals had
expected, and the transition to a true two-party state was not completed until the late
1970s. The biggest blow to liberal Texas Democrats came in 1970, when conservative
Lloyd Bentsen defeated Ralph Yarborough in the party’s primary. Labor, of course,
campaigned fervently for the Senator; many unions even contributed to a “Brown pot” to

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target ethnic Mexican voters. But the state’s corporate elites donated much more to Bentsen’s war chest, and the conservative prevailed.

Yarborough had long been the lone bright spot for the liberal movement, including the multiracial Democratic Coalition, but without the latter’s backing, he could not survive. Each of the civil rights movements likewise struggled for survival by the early 1970s, as did organized labor. White “independent” liberals still could not go it alone. More than a decade would pass before liberal activists celebrated victory in a statewide race. In an ironic twist that showed how far the liberals had fallen, the great Democratic sweep of 1982 produced a relatively progressive governor, Mark White. The ticket also included Jim Hightower and Ann Richards, but Bentsen’s name was at the top.

The coalition’s task remains unfinished today. Restaurants now serve African Americans, and the Texas Rangers no longer terrorize ethnic Mexicans. Most of the barriers to equal employment opportunity have been lifted. Yet organized labor has shrunk to its lowest density since the Wagner Act, while business interests continue to dominate state and national politics. Durable, structural racial inequality persists by almost any measure, including income, wealth, healthcare, and education. Most whites likewise lag far behind the increasingly distant elites.

If economic justice remains far away, the struggle for political democracy is also far from complete. In each of the major cities of Texas, as in most of urban America, black and brown neighborhoods can now elect their own, independent representatives to local, state, and national governments. But having a voice has not meant that anyone else listens to what they have to say. This is the paradox of post-civil rights America. We all have the right to determine our future, but we are too disorganized to do exercise it.
Many of us lack the political self-respect to demand more than a superficially representative government. And many self-styled activists have failed to find the methods necessary to transcend the deep divides that separate us. This book is a step toward recovering a few tricks from the historical toolbox—in the hopes that we may find ways to practice democracy in our own time.

**Black and Brown at Work**

What lessons can be gleaned from the history of multiracial coalition-building in mid-Twentieth Century Texas? First and foremost, the decades-long process of finding ways to collaborate was just that: a process. The stories presented above draw attention to the full meaning of the word “coalition”—a bringing together of separate, independent parts for a common cause, a term that indicates that differences preexisted and never fully disappeared. Too often “coalition” is used as a substitute for “coalescence,” which instead implies a coming together that collapses differences into a unitary whole.

The democratic partnerships among black, brown, and white labor and liberal organizers in Texas were “coalitions”—alliances built upon an explicit acknowledgment of different starting points, disparate agendas, diverse personnel, and only partially-overlapping aspirations. The multiracial struggle for democracy in the Lone Star State was not a univocal animal but a many-headed beast. It was the product of years of experimentation in which mutually distrustful elements—from geographically distant neighborhoods, with unique cultures and experiences, with similar but not identical grievances, with separate organizations and distinct bases and leaders—came together out of desperation and used one another to make progress toward their divergent (if related) goals. Over time, suspicion among coalition partners gradually gave way to a sense of
common purpose in which each element came to understand the need to go beyond
temporary alliances and support one another’s causes full-time. Still, they did not
“coalesce.” They remained distinct, each prioritizing their own needs and objectives
while having learned that they needed to be there for each other in order to make it to the
finish line.

Thus, while it is true that African American and ethnic Mexican civil rights
activists in Texas were in fact “fighting their own battles,” as one scholar recently put it,
they did so by working together. Their respective struggles did not proceed along
“parallel tracks” but rather traveled along routes that frequently intersected, crisscrossed
one another, at times recoiled apart, and ultimately arrived at the same depot. That is the
true meaning of “coalition”—as Bernice Johnson Reagon reminds us—working together
while still starting from (and returning to) separate “houses.”

Beyond clearing up this primary interpretive confusion, the story of coalition-
building in Texas explodes the myths of intra-ethnic solidarity that dominate our
understanding of what has come to be called “identity politics.” Popular memory as well
as scholarly studies of the civil rights movements that opened the door to black and
brown participation in self-government frequently assume a degree of unity among
African Americans or ethnic Mexicans living under Jim Crow that never actually existed.
Take the language used to describe them: commentators of all color refer to “the black
community,” and more recently, “the Hispanic community.” Present-day African
American political meetings are often infused with an implicit, under-the-radar

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7 Behnken, Fighting Their Own Battles (first and second quotations); Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Coalition
Politics: Turning the Century,” in Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, Barbara Smith. (New
Press], 2000), 343-356. The author thanks Brian for his friendship, encouragement, transparency,
generosity, and support—despite our interpretive disagreements.
declension narrative in which the good old days of segregation produced automatic unity among all blacks, who then lined up behind their traditional leaders to rise up against their common oppression. Scholars have poked many holes in this story, yet the myth continues to thrive. The Texas story should lay to rest any misconceptions about the existence of a unitary “black community” both then and now. Working-class African Americans like Moses and Erma LeRoy, and militant activists like G. J. Sutton who partnered with them, never described their task in terms of black versus white. Rather, they knew that the most intransigent obstacles to their quest for progress were other blacks, leaders who, in their view, “walked around with their hands out” and acted like Judas, selling out the dreams of their children and grandchildren for a few pieces of silver.

The power of such cultural nationalism similarly asserts itself in ethnic Mexican political gatherings, though the myth of unity has never possessed the weight that it carries among African Americans. Mexicanos in Texas, long perceived as political pawns whose votes were always for sale, have paradoxically transitioned into being viewed as political novices who are too short-sighted and naïve to work together for a common cause. Fragmentation replaced the patrones. Yet such formulations twist rather than refute the myth of a unified “community.” They assume that ethnic Mexicans should naturally come together to combat their common oppression by Anglos, rather than bickering themselves over the crumbs. A closer look at their history suggests an alternate interpretation. Ethnic Mexicans failed to unite because their common experiences of discrimination based on color and national origin were not always enough to overcome their internal differences. As with African Americans, class, ideology, and
organizing strategy and tactics all mattered at least as much as did ties of ethnicity. For militant and/or working-class civil rights activists like Albert Peña, Pancho Medrano, the brothers Garcia, or packinghouse worker Mary Salinas, ethnic Mexican business and community leaders often stood in the way of progress. The “vendidos,” as the activists called the ethnic Mexican elites, had their own profits in mind, rather than the interests of the working people that they sought to organize.

Intra-ethnic conflict thus raged within black and brown “communities,” just as it did among whites. Few white Americans expect otherwise when it comes to their own political activities. The divisions between conservatives and liberals, business and labor, and diplomacy and militant activism all seem natural enough in white neighborhoods, in the white “mainstream” media, among white elected representatives, and between ordinary white people and their self-appointed spokesmen. The fact that scholars often expect something different within black and brown communities—and that black and brown people do so as well!—demonstrates the deeply ingrained, unconscious white supremacy that all of us, of all colors, possess.

For black, brown, and white civil rights activists, then, class, ideology, strategy and tactics often mattered more than did appeals to automatic ethnic solidarity. On the ground, and in different ways, the most militant groups of black and brown civil rights activists demanded not only access but real, tangible power. The struggle was not about abstract rights but the achievement of true political democracy and equal economic opportunity. Only self-determination could accomplish these tasks; political influence that was not independent would only produce tokenism, which was plainly inadequate in their view. Gradualism likewise sacrificed independence for expediency. To be sure, the
devil was often in the details. Activists fiercely debated how far to compromise in order
to make gains, just as each voter internally grapples with how much he or she can
sacrifice to support a less than ideal candidate. To paraphrase Albert Peña, the activists
concluded that they were most successful when they stayed true to their core principles
and least effective when they failed to do so. From their vantage point, their decisions
were different from those faced by the “Uncle Toms” and “vendidos,” who simply sold
out the long-term quest power for short-term personal gains. The activists’ dilemma at
every turn centered on how to best retreat from each battle and live on to fight another
day. They remained obsessed with gaining autonomy, with winning independent
representation for the communities they organized. And they were willing to be unruly,
to get out in the streets and demonstrate, to cast aside pluralist political decorum and risk
violent reprisals and public criticism to achieve their goals. In Peña’s words, they cared
more about “justice” than they worried about “order.” They believed that their own so-
called community leaders, who served as diplomats and wielded influence with white
elites, had the exact opposite set of priorities.

Often thwarted in their ambitions by intra-ethnic opposition, black and brown
civil rights activists separately looked for ways to outflank their more conservative
antagonists. Inter-ethnic coalition-building became their primary weapon in common.

Much the same was true for the predominately-white labor movement. The Texas
AFL-CIO did not become a civil rights organization for altruistic or moral reasons. They
did so because of intra-ethnic conflict. The white business elites of Texas were giving it
to them on the shop floor and whipping their tails in electoral politics, to use two Lone
Star colloquialisms. Labor had little choice but to search for new allies to aid their
attempt to outflank their enemies. Finding ways to collaborate with militant African American and ethnic Mexican activists became their path forward. Hank Brown had seen it work in San Antonio and brought it to the state federation.

African American and ethnic Mexican labor struggles, the sit-in and Viva Kennedy movements, the creation of PASO and its subsequent splintering, the election of Gov. John Connally, and finally the Crystal City revolt all helped to “separate the wheat from the chaff,” as SNAP News put it. After all the tumult, black, brown, and white activists all clearly understood who among their ethnic communities was on their side and who opposed them, as well as who they could depend upon across racial lines.

By the early 1960s, they had developed a working relationship with one another that they called the Democratic Coalition. At its core was a series of basic agreements between its diverse participants on ideology (pro-civil rights), strategy (independent, liberal electoral politics), and tactics (direct action demonstrations and broad-based community organizing). Each leg of the coalition had its own reasons for participating, and the coordinated protests, blockworker program, electoral campaigns, and organizing initiatives served the purposes of each of their separate agendas. While their opponents advocated “voluntary,” gradual desegregation and conservative politics, the multiracial liberal alliance demanded integration, in Rev. Black’s words, “AS A RIGHT”—along with independent political self-determination for black and brown neighborhoods, equal economic opportunity, better wages and working conditions, and the ability to freely form unions. As noted above, they made significant progress toward these goals while still falling short of their loftiest aspirations—leaving work that remains to be done today.
Future coalition builders would do well to learn from their example. In a society as racially segregated as Twenty-First Century America remains, “identity politics” or ethnic-based community organizations will of necessity remain a centerpiece of civic life. Still, they will continue to face the obstacles produced by the nationalist myths of automatic racial solidarity (and the crippling declension narratives that accompany them). Nowhere is this more true than in the ostensibly race-neutral liberal organizations dominated by well-meaning whites. Like the Ralph Yarborough campaigns and the Harris County Democrats of the 1950s, these groups claim to speak for “all the people” but fail to do so because of their own unacknowledged, unconscious white supremacy.

The broad-based organizers of today can do as the “independent” liberals of Texas eventually did: listen to George Sanchez’s admonition that “only the mexicanos can speak for the mexicanos,” only the blacks can speak for the blacks, and only white workers can speak for white workers. They must acknowledge that no single group is the “custodian of liberalism,” as labor lawyer Chris Dixie put it in 1961, and instead acknowledge differences of opinion and perspective and then “put their money where their mouth is.”

The Coalition’s four-headed leadership structure may at first appear antiquated or even tokenistic to present-day observers, but it allowed the alliance’s four legs to embrace conflict and openly discuss diversity in ways that would paralyze most twenty-first organizations. It did so by formally recognizing the central importance of black and brown leadership as well as the limits of white paternalism.

Coalition leaders put differences on the table and talked explicitly about race. White liberals and even big labor agreed to make black and brown civil rights the group’s
highest priority. And they didn’t do it for charity but because their own liberation was bound up in the freedom of others.

Finally, the American labor movement could learn a lot from an understudied part of its own history, looking to the innovative strategies that sprang from desperation in one of its relative backwaters. In fact, the situation confronting the Texas AFL-CIO in the 1960s was not unlike the dilemma faced by the larger movement today. Its areas of strength and overall density were rapidly eroding, its political muscle had atrophied, and most of the unorganized workers hailed from cultures they did not understand and labored under industrial relations regimes that were not conducive to organizing. Texas labor responded to these challenges by moving beyond the worksite to engage in broad-based community organizing—in coalition with representatives from the ethnic and occupational groups they hoped to reach. “Operation Bootstrap” and other community unionism and political education initiatives did not succeed in reversing labor’s overall fortunes, but such efforts did make the Texas AFL-CIO relevant to new audiences in the most economically depressed reaches of the state, including inner cities. Today’s American labor movement writ large would do well to respond to its challenges by similarly de-emphasizing the old, workplace-based struggle and focusing on building coalitions for human rights.

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The story of black, brown, and white cooperation and conflict also makes the individual movements that comprise the coalition look different. The postwar black freedom struggle appears much more intimately connected to campaigns for economic opportunity and political power than is commonly assumed. Rather than being scared
straight by anti-communist repression of the early Cold War, activists like G. J. Sutton and Moses and Erma LeRoy redirected their efforts into new channels. In San Antonio, Sutton developed a militant community group that carried the SNAP News to the neighborhood and used it to organize countless ordinary Eastside residents for civil rights causes and political action. The LeRoys of Houston helped found the HCCO and served as diplomats that connected the city’s civil rights unionists to black businessmen and students as well as white and ethnic Mexican labor, civil rights, and political activists. And the leaders of the Texas NAACP based in Dallas emerged from the state lawsuit and injunction to found the Texas Council of Voters, which became the coordinating body for all of the state’s liberal black activists. All three cases suggest that electoral politics was not a mere end game or legacy of the civil rights struggle, a sort of selling out of the movement’s more expansive goals. Rather, just as economic issues were always part and parcel of the movement, so too was political organizing. It was about power and upward mobility, not just access.

Similarly, the so-called “Mexican American Generation” of the postwar period—often depicted as assimilationist, conservative, and obsessed with proving their whiteness and distancing themselves from blacks—in fact proved far more variegated. Certainly none of these characterizations apply to Albert Peña, or to the hundreds of labor and liberal activists who perennially reelected him to run PASO. When chided by a local columnist who urged him to hold a meeting of the few people he represented in a phone booth, Peña responded by calling a street-corner mass meeting and protest march. His desire to unite ethnic Mexican voters did not compel him to shy away from militant tactics, and he steadfastly supported building coalitions with African Americans. He
wrote a regular column in *SNAP News*, after all! And he was not alone: the professor George Sanchez and labor activists Mary Salinas, Bob Sanchez, Paul Montemayor, Henry Muñoz, Martin Garcia, Franklin and Pepper Garcia, Pancho Medrano, the leaders of Houston PASO, and others all engaged in multiracial coalitions, direct action protests, and steadfast support for an expansively-defined liberalism and civil rights for all. In fact, Peña, Medrano, and others had much in common ideologically with the youthful militants of the Chicano movement, at times serving as the mentors of the next wave of activists. They did all this while facing fierce opposition from more conservative activists their own age, people like Hector P. Garcia and Ed Idar of the G.I. Forum, who had vastly different ideas about the purpose of PASO, its political endorsements, its involvement in coalitions with labor and blacks, and the meaning of ethnic Mexican civil rights more generally. Attention to the coalition builders suggests that generation was a much less important dividing line among *Mexicanos* than were differences in terms of ideology, class, and tactics.

Finally, the story of black and brown coalition builders at work indicates that the labor movement was anything but bureaucratic and self-satisfied in the decades after World War II—at least in the South and Southwest. Rather, it was constantly working to organize the unorganized, in both traditional unionization campaigns and in new, unexpected places, namely, the African American and ethnic Mexican civil rights movements. Organizers like Pancho Medrano, Franklin Garcia, Erma LeRoy, and even Hank Brown all logged innumerable miles driving around the state as labor ambassadors in the fields of electoral politics and the black and brown fights for freedom. Even when no unions or unionists were involved, these too were working-class struggles, yet too
often they are pigeonholed by “historical gerrymandering” that separates the frequent overlapping of black, brown, and labor organizing. In Texas, labor’s unionization and political activities dovetailed so seamlessly with the black and brown freedom struggles that scholars cannot hope to understand any of the Coalition’s four legs without also studying the others.

In fact, for many individual organizers, working across ethnic lines in a variety of labor, civil rights, and political settings at times became second-nature, blurring but not erasing the lines between their main “house” and the other parts of the “coalition.” Likewise the separate legs of the Coalition were never entirely distinct, as many of its steering committee members inhabited more than one of its four discrete categories. Brought together by a common need for each other and a sense of common purpose, the state’s multiracial liberal coalitions might not have functioned at all if it were not for the work of these bridge-builders, the on-the-ground activists who straddled the coalition’s divides. They were the ones who every day “sold” the idea of coalition to countless rank and file participants who otherwise would not have understood why they should care about the travails of another ethnic group.

Thus it was in these countless day-to-day meetings and unrecorded personal conversations that the coalition was built, took shape, and had its most lasting, transformative effects. For example, as the poll tax drive hit its final stretch in January, 1964, Erma LeRoy and Latane Lambert left the coalition headquarters in Austin, jumped in one of their cars, and hit the road. The two Project VOTE co-directors had just dreamt up a final “sub-project” called “Students for Freedom Through Voting” that would take

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the organizers to a half-dozen all-black colleges in East and North Texas in less than a week’s time. At each stop they held meeting in collaboration with leaders of student governments and other campus organizations, who were asked to turn out crowds for the events. LeRoy and Lambert then addressed the students, urged those that were old enough to pay their poll taxes, and asked all of them to call or write or travel home to get their parents to do the same. Most of the meetings were hastily organized, and turnout was generally light. But the ten, twenty, or fifty students who met them at each school sat down with the two coalition veterans and learned about multiracial organizing for political change. Few of their prior experiences would have exposed them to such ideas—most of them had grown up in all-black neighborhoods, all-black schools, set off from and generally hostile toward the white folks who lived in newer houses and used brand new textbooks in their schools across the tracks. And here come two women, one white, one black, driving in a seven-hundred mile loop around Deep East Texas and armed only with their own experiences and the idea of “freedom through voting.” Both Lambert and LeRoy had been in the trenches since the late 1930s; both had close ties to a wide range of labor, civil rights, and political organizations; both had spouses who joined them in the struggle; and for both, living had become nearly synonymous with community organizing. The students saw firsthand two veterans of the struggle against Jim Crow who had become close friends because of their common activities in organized labor and the Democratic Coalition and their common faith in the capacity of ordinary men and women.

The duo left Austin and traveled to Prairie View, Marshall, and Hawkins in East Texas before swinging back through Dallas and Waco. In Dallas, they visited Bishop
College, which they reported was their “most successful school.” Only seventeen students took poll tax application forms at the meeting, but the student body president took a much larger stack to distribute once they left town. Still, a much larger group gathered to hear their pitch and, the organizers believed, returned home sold on their message. “Here we had the help of Pancho Medrano who supplied us with some films (on President Kennedy’s speech in Houston, racial discrimination, and the history of organized labor) which were shown to a group of students and proven to be an effective way to butter the students up for our program,” Lambert wrote in their combined report. As he had done before, Medrano turned on the movies, attracted a crowd, and joined the two other organizers in talking politics. Lambert’s final assessment was positive but concise, highlighting in just a few words both the quotidian nature of the gathering and the long haul of organizing that remained to be done: “The Program went over well,” she wrote, but “improvements...were needed.”

This is how it ends, with a multiracial group of veteran labor, civil rights, and political organizers gathered at an unremarkable community meeting, trying to figure out how to continue moving forward. Democracy remained an elusive goal, but the activists themselves had been transformed. They had reclaimed what theorist Sheldon Wolin calls their “birthright” of “politicalness”—that is, they had overcome a repressive political culture and were now participating fully in public life and working to shape their own destiny. At the same time, they had helped countless other ordinary people find their own voices as well. The worst horrors of Jim Crow were no more, but its vestiges persisted. LeRoy, Lambert, Medrano, and innumerable others like them knew that

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9 “Report on Student Project,” Lambert Papers, AR127-30-5.
“improvements in the program were needed.” Thanks to their decades in the trenches, there were thousands of people like them who now had that “sense of somebodiness” and were ready to carry the struggle forward.
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**Biography**

Max Krochmal was born in Las Vegas in 1982 and raised in Reno, Nevada. He first learned about social change from his parents and grandparents, who told him lots of stories that he did not fully understand. He attended the University of California, Santa Cruz, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in 2004 and receiving the Steck Family Award for Finest Senior Thesis for his activist research among banana workers in Ecuador. During college, Max worked intermittently with several California locals of the Service Employees International Union and then worked full-time for the union’s Local 715 until 2005.

Since then, Max has been a graduate student in the Department of History at Duke University, receiving a Master of Arts degree in 2007. He was a fellow at the Center for Documentary Studies, where he taught courses on oral history research. He also helped lead a service learning trip to South Africa. He won the Western Historical Association’s Walter Rundell Research Award and Trennert-Iverson Conference Scholarship and was offered a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the United States Studies Centre in Sydney, Australia, which he declined. Beginning in fall 2011, Max will be an Assistant Professor of History at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. He is the author of “An Unmistakably Working-Class Vision: Birmingham’s Foot Soldiers and Their Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Southern History* LXXVI, no. 4 (November 2010): 923-960; and “Labor and Multiracial Politics in Post-World War II Texas,” in Robert H. Zieger, ed., *Life and Labor in the New New South: Essays in Southern Labor History since 1950* (Gainesville; University Press of Florida, forthcoming 2011).