

# THE MEXICAN AMERICANS ORGANIZE

*A number of organizations have sprung up to fight for first class citizenship for four million Mexican Americans in the Southwest*

*By Frances Lym*

THE Irish in our country celebrate St. Patrick's Day; the Jews mark the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising—and the Mexicans have a national holiday, too, in Cinco de Mayo (Fifth of May). This is one of Mexico's most important holidays. It symbolizes the Mexicans' struggle for freedom and the right to determine their own destiny. For this day marks the victory by a Mexican force in 1861 during the war with France. On Cinco de Mayo the Mexicans defeated a superior French force at Puebla, gateway to Mexico City on the road from the debarkation port of Vera Cruz. This victory has inspired generations of Mexicans since then and naturally finds an echo as a symbol of justice and freedom in the hearts of Mexicans living in the United States.

And this day is all the more meaningful to Mexicans in the United States because justice and equality are so largely denied them. This national minority numbers about four million and is concentrated mainly in the Southwest. Most of them are agricultural workers. A number work in metal mining and on the railroads. They also have a small middle class, mostly little business men and some professionals.

The intense chauvinism and discrimination against Mexican Americans have their historic origin in the practices and attitudes developed during the Mexican War of 1846-48. This was the expansionist war as a result of which Mexico was robbed of about half her territory, which became the great Southwest of the United States. Since then Mexicans have been cruelly exploited economically and the objects of sharp discrimination.

In his important book, *North from Mexico* (1948), the outstanding liberal Carey McWilliams characterizes their unjust stereotyping. The work of United States historians and sociologists, he says, "apparently consists in the sum total of the voluminous statistics on Mexican delinquency. Poor housing, low wages, illiteracy, rates of disease. . . . This data 'proved' that Mexicans lacked leadership, dis-

cipline and organization; that they segregated themselves; that they are lacking in thrift and enterprise, and so forth." And the stereotype of the Mexican in our movies and other media of mass entertainment is well known. Nor do the Mexicans have anything like the representation in government that their number warrants. In early years physical violence was inflicted on Mexicans in this country and lynchings were a pattern as late as 1890, as Carey McWilliams shows. More recently attacks on Mexicans have also taken on more subtle forms of discrimination of every sort. And police brutality against them is still prevalent in the Southwest.

But Mexican Americans have begun to organize in the fight for their civil rights. A variety of organizations have sprung up in the Mexican community, especially since World War II, to fight for first class citizenship. Here we shall not attempt an analysis of all the forces at work in this struggle, but we shall present only some aspects of the organized efforts of the Mexican community.

## *Fight for Representation*

The vigorous "GI Forum" was organized in Texas in 1950 by some young war veterans and professionals. Through its legal department this group has carried on various campaigns against segregation in the schools, police brutality and other aspects of life. Already the "GI Forum" has won a victory in the United States Supreme Court with a favorable decision on the selection of persons of Mexican origin for jury service. And like other organizations in the Mexican community, this group has joined both with Mexican and non-Mexican groups in its struggles. During the 1952 election campaign the chairman of the board of directors of the Forum, Dr. H. P. Garcia, was appointed to the statewide steering committee of the Democratic Party of Texas to campaign for the Stevenson ticket.

Representation in government has taken a step forward with the political career of Edward Roybal in Los Angeles. He has been elected to the Los Angeles City Council and was candidate for lieutenant governor on the Democratic ticket in 1954. In fact, he could have been elected if there had been a more completely united effort among minority groups toward this end. This opinion was confirmed by

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Mrs. T. Pittman, California field secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, at the second national convention of the important Mexican organization, the Community Service Organization.

The Community Service Organization (called "CSO") has conducted huge voting registration campaigns. This phase of activity began in the Eastside of Los Angeles in 1948 and has since reached into every hamlet in which the CSO exists, the Mexican communities of Alameda County in Northern California south to the counties surrounding Phoenix, Arizona.

The CSO carries on activities relating to citizenship. One of these is defense of Mexican non-citizens threatened with deportation. The organization has gone on record for repeal of the McCarran-Walter act and at the recent convention a panel discussion was devoted to this question.

A large area of work is the preparation of Mexicans for completing the requirements for citizenship. Since the McCarran-Walter act permits examinations for citizenship to be taken in the native language, classes on citizenship taught in Spanish have been set up in cooperation with other community groups and school boards. These classes have mushroomed. They began in Los Angeles in the summer of 1953. Three weeks after they were announced, ten classes with over 400 students were functioning. The program has grown and other organizations have offered their services to aid in the work. Spanish classes on citizenship are now held in Jewish community centers, public libraries, churches, settlement houses and other places.

### **Connection with Labor**

One important feature of CSO is its relationship to the labor movement. Among its leaders are Mexican officers of trade unions. In this way the program and demands of the labor movement are brought directly into the Mexican community and are merged programmatically with the needs of the Mexican people. The CSO's national president is an organizer of the Packinghouse Workers Union who is organizing agricultural workers. The secretary-treasurer of CSO is an international representative of the Steel Workers' Union. While a number of professionals are in the local leadership, chapters also have trade unionists as officers. The president of the Los Angeles chapter is a business agent of the Butchers' Union.

Perhaps most important of all is the participation of Mexican Americans in the trade union movement. Outstanding in this respect is the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union, about 15 per cent of whose members are Mexicans. The heroic strike of these workers a few years ago at Bayard, New Mexico, was immortalized in the great film, *Salt of the Earth*. This movie showed how the labor objectives of the union are integrally related to the fight of Mexicans for first class citizenship. Other Mexican workers are organized into unions in the cannery, agricultural, packing, steel, oil, garment and other industries.

Among other organizations in the Mexican American

community is the Alianza Hispano-Americana, whose headquarters are in Tucson, Arizona. The civil rights program of this organization includes the fight against segregation in the schools. Recently the Alianza joined with the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP in filing suit in the United States District Court against segregation in the school system of El Centro, California.

### **Campaign Against School Segregation**

This question of segregation is one of the most important for the Mexican American community, as it is for the Negro people. For many years Mexican children have felt the sting of discrimination in the school system, which relegated them to manual training and home economics. Mexican children had to put up a fight to gain an academic education. A CSO survey a few years ago showed the extent of discrimination in the curricula of schools in the minority areas as compared with the non-minority areas. The report showed that two Mexican and Negro communities had 79 and 83 academic classes, respectively, while in schools of predominantly non-minority areas there were 17 and 151 such classes. Most of the educators questioned about the reason for the discrepancy gave similar answers. They said that, since only a small percentage of their students could afford to go to college, the primary responsibility was to prepare the student to earn a livelihood. Other said there was little call for academic classes.

Yet, today over 4,000 youth of Mexican origin in Los Angeles are enrolled in the East Los Angeles Junior College. Community leaders have recently set up an organization to raise funds for scholarships to help Mexican youth who desire professional training. A demand has also been raised for representation on the Los Angeles Board of Education and the current municipal election campaign has one candidate of Mexican origin running for this office.

Throughout the Southwest, small businessmen are also organized in the Mexican Chamber of Commerce to help the fight for first class citizenship. A recent national convention of this group in Los Angeles heard one of its leading members charge that the Immigration Service was using "Gestapo methods" to deport Mexican nationals.

There is also cooperation between the Mexican and Jewish communities in Los Angeles. The relationship got off to a good start in 1949 in the campaign to elect Edward Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council under the slogan of Mexican representation. Since then leaders of the Jewish community have worked with Mexican organizations such as the CSO and have developed intercultural activities with the Mexican community. One of the outstanding events in the Eastside of the city was the Mexican Independence Day celebration on September 16. This program is held each year in the Jewish Soto-Michigan Community Center.

From this brief review of some organizational activities it can be seen that the Mexican American community is on its way in the struggle for equality. It will play a part in the important 1956 election campaign.

practiced in the schools of America. In the Latin School in Boston "half the term we spent reading *The Merchant of Venice*" and the Yankee teacher nicknamed "The Gunner" taught it in a routine way, accepting its anti-Semitism as a matter of course, just as he accepted the segregation of the Jewish boys in the classroom. Other teachers squirm and seek to apologize for Shakespeare.

Thus, John B. Shackford, professor of English at Cornell College, has performed an amazing feat of scholarly doubletalk in his essay, "Shylock's Humanity," in the *University of Kansas City Review* (Winter 1954), where he admits that Shylock is "the stereotype Jew" who is "equated with the devil" but argues that Shakespeare really didn't mean it and really intended the whole thing as an ironic commentary on the stereotype of the Jew and on "the very delight that his audience may be supposed to have taken in the baiting of the unfortunate Jew." Which is very clever of Professor Shackford. But Shakespeare is not on trial and needs no nimble-witted defense. It is obvious that in *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare pandered to his audience, whether or not he himself believed in the stereotype of the Jew. And the plain fact

is that the impact of *The Merchant of Venice*, on stage or in the classroom, is definitely anti-Semitic.

Are Jews really impervious to this kind of "academic" anti-Semitism or are they cowed by the name of Shakespeare? The reaction of Jewish groups in Canada to the selection by the Stratford Festival Committee of *The Merchant of Venice* for presentation this year shows that neither is the case. The Jewish Congress of Canada vigorously objected to the choice. So did other Jewish groups. But in this country—not a murmur from Jewish quarters against presenting *The Merchant of Venice* on the stage or teaching it to millions of young Americans in the classroom.

## Letter from Readers

### *It's a Grand Idea . . .*

Editors, JEWISH LIFE:

Let me say, it's a grand idea to honor Morris U. Schappes. I'm sorry that I'm

not able to be present only because of a previous date for my grand-daughter's seventh birthday. The enclosed check for ten dollars is given in her name with deep affection for JEWISH LIFE and Morris U. Schappes.

Brooklyn

M. L.

### Letter of Thanks

Editors, JEWISH LIFE:

Allow me through the medium of JEWISH LIFE to express my thanks to all my friends who participated in the dinner given in my honor [in the Bronx on March 13]. I also want to express my gratitude for all the warm messages and letters which were received by me. I particularly want to thank Morris U. Schappes for his warm greeting and his meaningful message.

Bronx

CLARA SHAVELSON

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Philadelphia

S. T.

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