Filipino Farm Labor Organization: A Lesson in Filipino Leadership

by Julie Sindel

On August 27, 1934, over three thousand Filipino field laborers joined white packing shed workers in a general strike against the Salinas Valley lettuce industry. The Filipino Labor Union (FLU), representing the field workers, requested a wage increase from thirty to forty cents an hour in addition to union recognition. Similarly, the Vegetable Packers Association (VPA), affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), demanded higher pay and improved working conditions. Both labor unions had separately attempted to negotiate their demands with the Salinas Growers-Shippers Association, but to no avail. Thus, the FLU and the VPA joined forces in an effort to coerce the Growers-Shippers to the bargaining table. FLU and VPA representatives signed an agreement that neither would return to work until the growers met the demands of both unions.1

As seven thousand field and shed-workers simultaneously went on strike, the Salinas lettuce industry immediately felt the impact. Growers lost an estimated one hundred thousand dollars a day and, consequently, became committed to ending the walk-out. They imported Mexican, Japanese, and non-unionized Filipino workers as scabs. In addition, growers employed the services of local law enforcement and the California Highway Patrol in an effort to silence labor agitators. Authorities arrested several striking Filipinos on charges of "inciting a riot" or "vagrancy." Local vigilantes intimidated and beat Filipino strikers, driving more than five hundred Filipino workers from the Pajaro Valley.2

Despite the increasing hostility against the strike, the FLU remained committed to its goals. After the VPA agreed to arbitration, effectively ending its participation in the strike, approximately 1,800 Filipino farm workers stayed out of the fields until their demands were met. On October 8, 1934, the Monterey County Industrial Relations Board announced a settlement in the Salinas lettuce strike. In the end, the FLU received the requested pay increase as well as union recognition. More importantly, the Salinas lettuce strike of 1934 demonstrated the resolve of Filipino farm workers, enhancing their reputation as one of the most militant groups of agricultural laborers in the 1930s.3

A number of select scholarly works shed light on Filipino farm worker militancy by exploring their unionization efforts in California

1 Howard DeWitt, Violence in the Fields: California Filipino Farm Labor Unionization During the Great Depression (Saratoga, CA: Century Twenty-One Publishing, 1980), 74, 85-86.
2 DeWitt, Violence in the Fields, 87, 91-94.
3 DeWitt, Violence in the Fields, 91-94.
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during the Great Depression. These accounts provide an historical background for Filipino labor organization, chronicling the large influx of Filipino immigration into the United States during the 1920s; the subsequent violent backlash against the new immigrants; and Filipino organization as a response to deplorable political, social, and economic conditions.

Yet, while the available research offers detailed descriptions about Filipino labor unions and the strikes in which they took part, it neglects the significance of Filipino community leaders in promoting and maintaining militancy. Indeed, Howard DeWitt maintained that Filipino leaders remained too divided and that the Filipino press was disorganized and disinterested in addressing the plight of Filipino farm workers. A thorough analysis of primary documents proves DeWitt's assertions were not altogether accurate. Editors of the Filipino press often served as leaders of community organizations, actively calling for Philippine independence. In addition, they used newspaper articles and editorials to respond to anti-Filipino violence and to promote unionization. Filipino community leaders, such as Damiano Marcuelo, Rufo Canete, and Luis Agudo, literally organized farm laborers into labor unions and led their countrymen in strikes against powerful growers. In their unionizing efforts, Filipino labor organizers changed strategies to adapt to seemingly insurmountable obstacles and, in the process, contributed to the militant reputation of Filipino farm workers. Thus, Filipino community leaders must be given agency in the narrative of Filipino farm labor unionization.

A number of secondary sources place Filipino laborers' experiences in 1930s California within a broader context of race relations or large-scale agricultural labor movements. However, a select few focus primarily on the social, political, and economic history of Filipino laborers in California, a previously neglected emphasis in historical scholarship.

In their respective works, Lorraine Crouchett and Sonia Wallovits stressed the importance of strictly emphasizing the Filipino experience in California. In *Filipinos in California: From the Days of the Galleons to the Present*, Crouchett maintained that Filipinos made significant contributions to the development and economic growth of California. She traced the social, political, and economic history of the Filipino community, dividing her book into three parts: the origins of United States involvement in the Philippine Islands, the immigration of Filipinos to California, and “Filipino survival among Americans.” Crouchett described Filipino labor organization as an example of Filipinos adjusting to various obstacles within the dominant American culture. She added that this

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adaptability accounted for Filipino survival and their ability to make significant achievements in California.5

Wallovits also traced the history of Filipinos in California, but for a slightly different purpose than Crouchett. In her Master’s thesis for the University of Southern California, Wallovits intended to underscore the legal, economic, and socio-cultural problems Filipinos encountered during the 1930s in order to demonstrate similarities and differences between Filipinos and other minority groups. Although she fell short of providing an effective comparative analysis, Wallovits’ detailed account of Filipino immigration, exploitation, discrimination, and unionization allows for a better understanding of Filipino farm workers’ experiences in California.

Similarly, Howard DeWitt paid special attention to the background and motives for Filipino unionization in two separate monographs: Violence in the Fields: California Filipino Farm Labor Unionization During the Great Depression and Anti-Filipino Movements in California: A History, Bibliography, and Study Guide. In Violence in the Fields, DeWitt explained the sophisticated labor union mentality that Filipino agricultural laborers exemplified, and the author highlighted anti-Filipino violence as the primary motive in Filipino unionization. Anti-Filipino Movements in California detailed the causes of anti-Filipino demonstrations, with an emphasis on an anti-Filipino riot that erupted in Watsonville, California in 1930. DeWitt’s purpose was to encourage the teaching and studying of racial conflict in an effort to prevent future race riots. Indeed, he believed that learning about the Watsonville riot could provide a valuable lesson about race riots in general.6

DeWitt’s intent to create more peaceful race relations echoed Carey McWilliams’ purpose in Brothers Under the Skin. Originally published in 1942, this book illuminates the racial discrimination that several minority groups, includingFilipino farm laborers, encountered in the United States. McWilliams implicated the federal government for neglecting the problem and insisted that the government can and should protect minorities’ civil rights.

McWilliams also examined Filipino farm workers’ experiences in Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California. He included Filipinos in the large number of migratory farm workers that large growers exploited in California, a state that “cultivated race prejudice.” McWilliams insisted that migratory workers remained in a precarious position because of the attitudes aligned against them. He intended to show that the fabled notion of the California agricultural scene—a pastoral scene of small farmers working the land in an effort to produce bountiful harvests—stood in stark contrast to the reality of large agricultural corporations and the continual racial violence against the

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6 DeWitt, Anti-Filipino Movements in California, 89.

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workers who actually tilled the soil. The treatment of Filipino farm workers, in McWilliams opinion, exemplified this point.  

The works of Stuart Jamieson and Don Mitchell reflected McWilliams' influence, as both authors contrasted the imagery of California as a "promised land" for agricultural workers. In Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape, Mitchell illustrated Filipino labor organization as an example of farm workers' attempts to "create new spaces in which to maneuver, spaces set in opposition to the landscape" that growers dictated. Mitchell argued that militancy was the only way farm workers could reveal the ruthless exploitation of the California landscape. He included Filipino unionization as part of this process.  

Jamieson shattered the myth of the idyllic California landscape in his report to the United States Department of Labor regarding agricultural labor conditions in the 1930s. In Labor Unionism in American Agriculture, Jamieson examined Filipino farm labor unionization as part of the general history of farm labor unions and strikes. He highlighted the attempts to organize agricultural and allied workers into international unions affiliated with the American Communist Party, the AFL, or the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). He also analyzed agricultural labor unionism within various regional contexts. Addressing the organization of Filipino farm workers in California, Jamieson underscored frequent exploitation and discrimination as motivating factors in the development of Filipino militancy.  

The increase in Filipino immigration into the United States during the 1920s inspired an American backlash against it. Between 1923 and 1929, Filipinos arrived in California at a rate of 4,177 a year. Recruiting efforts in Hawaii and the Philippine Islands encouraged this large influx. The National Origins Act of 1924 severely restricted the immigration of various immigrant groups and excluded Japanese laborers altogether. According to McWilliams, growers grew concerned about maintaining a cheap labor force, and therefore sent recruiters to entice workers with "glowing accounts of idyllic working conditions." Because Filipinos were nationals under protection of the United States government, they could immigrate freely into the United States.  

The unique national status of Filipino immigrants stemmed from the political relationship between the United States and the Philippines. The United States acquired the Philippines after the Spanish-American War in 1898, and began establishing American schools and businesses on the

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7 Carey McWilliams, Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939), xv.  
9 Jamieson, Labor Unionism in American Agriculture, 2, 74-75.  
10 Carey McWilliams, Brothers Under the Skin (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1951), 234-235, 237.  

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Islands in an attempt to "Americanize" the inhabitants. Filipino nationalists, who had fought alongside Americans against the Spanish, rebelled against the American takeover and embarked on a three-year war against United States forces. The United States military defeated the rebels in 1901, and one year later, Congress passed legislation regarding Filipino political status. Crouchett noted that Section Four of the Cooper Act of 1902 defined Filipinos as "citizens of the Philippine Islands and, as such, entitled to the protection of the United States Government but not to United States citizenship."\(^{11}\)

Unlike Filipino immigrants prior to 1920, most of whom came to California as students, those that arrived during the 1920s were typically laborers from Hawaiian sugar plantations or directly from the Philippines. Approximately ninety-three percent of Filipino immigrants who came to the United States between 1920 and 1929 were male, 84.3 percent of them single and between the ages of fourteen and forty-three. Wallovits argued that these characteristics eventually led to economic and social problems for the new immigrants.\(^{12}\)

As the number of Filipinos in California continued to swell, they increasingly faced economic exploitation, race prejudice, and mob violence. The Cooper Act denied Filipinos citizenship and made them vulnerable by limiting job opportunities. Thus, Filipinos typically worked in three types of occupations: domestic service, the fishing and canning industries, and agricultural fieldwork. The majority of Filipinos in California, however, worked in agricultural labor, particularly in specialized crops such as lettuce, asparagus, carrots, and beets. Growers claimed that Filipinos were better suited for "stoop" labor because of their small hands and short stature. In addition, Wallovits maintains that growers often characterized Filipino laborers as docile, and "more willing than white workers to put up with longer hours, poorer board, and worse lodging." Hence, growers paid Filipinos lower wages than any other immigrant group. Pinoy\(^{13}\) wages fell even further, as growers found it profitable to use more men per acre for certain types of crops like asparagus.\(^{14}\)

Filipino workers typically worked in crews under the direction of labor contractors. The labor contractor was usually a Filipino who negotiated with growers to provide a number of laborers to harvest the crop. Crouchett explained how the contracting system worked in the 1920s and 1930s. The growers would pay the contractor, who then might deduct money for room, board, and other forms of debt. McWilliams asserted that

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11 Crouchett, Filipinos in California, 23-27, 34.
12 Wallovits, Filipinos in California, 22-23.
13 The term Pinoy is a nickname used for Filipinos who are in the United States. The term originated amongst Filipino farm laborers in the 1920s, first appearing in the Seattle-based publication Filipino Student Bulletin in 1928. Information obtained in an interview with Dawn Mabalon, Ph.D., National Trustee of the Filipino American National Historical Society, May 18, 2006.
14 Wallovits, Filipinos in California, 27-31; McWilliams, Brothers Under the Skin, 237.
contractors often exploited their fellow countrymen. Maintaining a stable work force proved beneficial to the contractor, so he encouraged Filipino laborers to spend all of their earnings in the pool halls and gambling dens. This way, the laborers remained in the contractor's employment unable to migrate to another destination. In addition, McWilliams argued, "Racketeering Filipinos [sold] the Pinoy a bewildering variety of worthless merchandise as well as tickets for raffles, picnics, lotteries, 'sweetheart contests,' and cockfights." Thus, Filipino farm workers faced exploitation on two fronts: American growers hungry for a profit, and their fellow countrymen preying on an easy target.\(^1\)

Pinoy vulnerability stemmed partly from the unique social conditions in which they lived. According to McWilliams, Filipinos did not create permanent settlements. The large disproportion of male to female Filipino immigrants resulted in a Filipino population of single men who migrated frequently in search of seasonal agricultural work. Most Filipinos worked on large farms and lived in segregated bunkhouses supplied either by the grower or the contractor. Crouchett explained that, because Filipinos received such low wages, groups of up to twenty-five Pinoys would pool their money in order to rent one bunkhouse. Thus, the living conditions were cramped and often unsanitary. Filipinos also combined their wages to buy a car or a fancy suit to which all had access. To be sure, their low socioeconomic status created a need for cooperation.\(^2\)

In addition to poor housing, Filipinos experienced discrimination in other facets of American life. McWilliams noted that Filipinos were barred from hotels, cafes, swimming pools, certain pools halls, apartments, and other facilities. Therefore, they went to Chinatown during their off time, frequenting the Chinese gambling dens, pool halls, and prostitution houses. The overwhelming lack of Filipino women resulted in Filipino men seeking out the companionship of white women. Because the California Civil Code prohibited Filipino men from marrying white women, Wallovits argued that Pinoys were forced to patronize prostitution houses and taxi dance halls, where white female dancers entertained Filipino men for the price of ten cents. This type of interaction with white women earned Filipinos the scorn of white society, eventually contributing to anti-Filipino movements in California.\(^3\)

White Americans listed several social factors as justification for anti-Filipino sentiment. Filipino interaction with white women topped the list, but as Wallovits pointed out, Americans also accused Filipinos of being "unassimilable" and a health menace. Additionally, Americans ridiculed

\(^1\) Wallovits, Filipinos in California, 31; Crouchett, Filipinos in California, 35; McWilliams, Brothers Under the Skin, 238-239.

\(^2\) McWilliams, Brothers Under the Skin, 239-241; McWilliams, Factories in the Field, 131; Crouchett, Filipinos in California, 35.

\(^3\) McWilliams, Introduction in Carlos Bulosan, America is in the Heart (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), xii; Wallovits, Filipinos in California, 60; McWilliams, Factories in the Field, 143.
Pinoys for “spending lavishly” on cars and suits, and white workers claimed that Filipinos were arrogant. In an interview with UC Berkeley graduate student James Wood in 1930, a white fruit worker lamented that the Filipinos “want to step right in amongst whites....They think they’re as good as you are.”

The mainstream press contributed to the negative perception of Filipino immigrants. According to Wallovits, newspapers depicted them as perpetrators of crimes, the dominant motive being jealousy and rivalry in relationships with white women. Indeed, it was not uncommon in the 1930s to read headlines like the following: “Filipinos Held in Latest Stabbing”; “Filipino Kills 3, Wounds 3 Others”; “Six Filipinos Are Quizzed in Murder Probe: White Wives of Two Men Are Also Questioned”; and “Filipino Bandits Rob Delta Café; Two Are Taken.”

Anti-Filipino sentiment continued to grow as more Filipino immigrants came to work for the lowest wages in the fields of California. McWilliams noted that, similar to calls for the exclusion of Chinese and Japanese laborers, a “third wave of anti-Oriental agitation” began urging the restriction of Filipino immigrants. The American Federation of Labor pushed for restriction, claiming that Filipino laborers represented unfair competition with white workers. Thus, in 1928, the AFL endorsed Congressman Richard Welch’s and Senator Hiram Johnson’s bill to exclude Filipinos by declaring them “aliens.” Although the bill failed to pass, the issue of Filipino exclusion did not die. In fact, the calls for restriction increased after a series of anti-Filipino riots in 1929-1930.

Howard DeWitt claimed that anti-Filipino rioting in various rural California communities reflected the increasing social and economic tensions that had been building throughout the 1920s. He paid specific attention to the Watsonville riot of 1930 because it was the most highly publicized and prolonged anti-Filipino demonstration. The riot began after the Watsonville Pajaronian published an interview with a local judge, D.W. Rohrback. Rohrback had recently proposed a resolution to the Northern Monterey Chamber of Commerce. The resolution railed against the social ills of a local taxi dance hall, emphasized the moral and health threats Filipinos posed to American society, and urged the federal government to “send those unwelcome inhabitants from our shores.”

Nine days after Judge Rohrback’s sentiments became public, a vigilante mob of five hundred local white youths marched on the Palm Beach dance hall, located just outside of Watsonville. Although the police dispersed the crowd, anti-Filipino attacks continued for five more days.

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\(^{19}\) Wallovits, *Filipinos in California*, 57-58; Untitled, undated articles in Wood, “Materials Concerning Filipinos in California,” Box 4 Folders 4-5.


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On the last day of rioting, four hundred vigilantes assailed the Northern Monterey County Filipino Club, killing one Filipino and brutally beating several others. That evening, a mob of 250 riddled a Filipino bunkhouse with over one hundred rounds of shots, killing Fermin Tobera, a twenty-two year old lettuce worker, while he lay in his bed sleeping. Although authorities arrested eight young white men and sentenced them to two years in jail for their participation in the attack, four received immediate probation and the other four received probation after serving only thirty days. Local authorities never identified the person who shot and killed Fermin Tobera and the case went unsolved.22

Even though social tensions ignited the riot, DeWitt argued that “[i]n the final analysis...the Great Depression’s impact upon the economy acted as a catalyst to the organization of anti-Filipino vigilante groups.” He explained that anti-Filipino feeling, as expressed in the Watsonville riot, “represented a sophisticated blend of small business fears that large corporations profited from cheap labor,” and concerns about Filipino “social intercourse” with white women.23

The Watsonville riot prompted strong reactions from the Filipino community. Prior to 1930, the Filipino press primarily focused on social and cultural events, rarely addressing the plight of Filipino farm workers. After the Watsonville riot, however, Filipino newspaper articles and editorials became more militant in language and content. Specifically, The Three Stars out of Stockton and the Salinas-based Philippines Mail featured pieces that overtly criticized American treatment of Filipinos.

One week after the Watsonville riot, The Three Stars carried articles that lashed out at Judge Rohrback’s resolution. Responding to Rohrback’s claim that Filipinos posed a moral and economic threat to American society, an editorial in The Three Stars argued that “[i]f we are ‘deteriorating the white race,’ what about the Americans in the Philippines?” The writer of the piece asserted that most prostitutes in the Philippines were the abandoned daughters of American soldiers. The same newspaper edition published an angry retort to Rohrback’s criticism of Filipino men lusting after white women, arguing that Filipinos were brought up under the principle that God created men equal, and therefore Filipinos do not complain “when American men in the Philippines take...Filipino women to the altar.”24

The editor of The Three Stars, Damiano L. Marcuelo, accused Rohrback of inciting the mob attack on Filipinos by “hurling invectives and ugly epithets...appealing to the sentiment by suggesting violence to the mob mind.” Marcuelo called this “an exhibition of narrowness and vapidness unbecoming the dignity of the Bench.” Marcuelo’s editorial was

22 DeWitt, Anti-Filipino Movements in California, 92-98.
23 DeWitt, Violence in the Fields, 41, 44; DeWitt, Anti-Filipino Movements in California, 15, 49.
24 The Three Stars (Stockton), February 5, 1930.

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featured next to a political cartoon that depicted an angry mob overtaking the law. The caption read “Watsonville Justice Ashamed.”25

The Three Stars issued a similar diatribe against Judge H.S. Jorgensen after he handed down a two-year suspended sentence to each of the eight youths convicted for their involvement in the Watsonville riot. An article appearing in the April 10, 1930 edition of the paper claimed that the judge’s decision reflected his prejudice against Filipinos. The piece also accused him of encouraging further acts of mob violence because “future culprits will be ever bold, thinking that lenient Judge Jorgensen will free them anyway.”26

The Watsonville riot spurred staff members of The Three Stars to intensify the call for Philippine independence. D.L. Marcuelo commented that terrorizing Filipinos while refusing to grant independence to their home country was “a travesty on justice beyond human comprehension.” Luis Agudo, assistant editor of the newspaper, addressed the degradation of Filipinos in California while speaking to a crowd at a “Humiliation Day” ceremony in honor of the slain Filipino lettuce worker, Fermín Tobera. Agudo asserted that Filipinos were ready to give up the rights to which they were entitled under the United States Constitution, provided that the United States granted the Philippines independence.27

Anti-Filipino demonstrations resulted in a reinvigorated drive to exclude Filipino immigration. Ironically, proponents of the movement began advocating Philippine independence as the means to achieving exclusion. One week after the Watsonville riot and subsequent racial clashes in other California communities, Senator Millard Tydings claimed that “[t]he more Filipinos come into the United States, the more labor riots and difficulties will ensue.” Richard Welch, author of the original Filipino exclusion bill in the House of Representatives, cited the labor riots of 1930 as grounds for granting independence to the Philippine Islands.28

As Congress debated various proposals promoting Philippine independence as the vehicle for immigration restriction, the Filipino press actively protested. Responding to Welch’s accusation that Pinoys took jobs from white workers and failed to assimilate into American culture, The Three Stars staff retorted that Filipinos came to California to cultivate the fields, “not plunder as [Americans] have plucked the fruits of other people’s soil.” This was a seething critique against the American takeover of Hawaii and the Philippines after the Spanish-American War.29

On March 24, 1934, Congress passed the Tydings-McDuffie Act, effectively imposing severe restrictions against Filipino immigration. The law provided for the establishment of a commonwealth government in the

26 The Three Stars, April 10, 1930.
27 The Three Stars, February 5, 1930 and February 15, 1930.
28 Cited in Wallowits, Filipinos in California, 8-9.
29 The Three Stars, January 1, 1931.
Philippines under the protection of the United States for a ten year interim period, after which the Philippines would become an independent nation. The Tydings-McDuffie Act also set a quota for Filipino immigration, allowing only fifty immigrants per year from the Philippines. Wallovits notes that the quota against Filipino immigration was lower than any other immigrant group. The following year, President Roosevelt signed into law the Repatriation Act, which provided transportation for Filipinos leaving the United States to go back to the Philippines. Those Filipinos who chose to be repatriated would not be allowed to return to the United States. Consequently, Filipinos became foreigners rather than nationals.30

Soon after Congress passed the Tydings-McDuffie Act, the Filipino press urged Filipinos at home and abroad to oppose its ratification. On April 30, 1934, an editorial in the Philippines Mail warned that “[o]nce we accept this false promise of independence, we will forever be trapped and enslaved by the selfish foreign financial interests that are exploiting the Islands and their people.” Another editorial condemned the provision of the bill calling for allegiance to the United States while, simultaneously, the American government placed a restrictive quota against Filipino immigration. The staff writer rhetorically asked “[h]ow does that sound to you? You’re kicked out like a dog, but must whine and cringe when the American capitalist takes the notion to snap his fingers.”31

Facing economic exploitation, mob violence, and an uncertain political status, Filipino newspapers recommended the formation of community organizations, including clubhouses, recreational centers, “and other such agencies best calculated to meet the social and economic needs of every individual.” Several of these requests accompanied criticism about the seeming apathy of the Philippine government to the plight of Filipino farm workers in California. In July 1932, The Three Stars urged the Philippine government to create the position of labor commissioner, responsible for protecting and assisting Filipino laborers in America. The Philippines Mail ran a piece a year later that blamed Filipinos’ “aggressive reputation” on the desperation and helplessness they felt because Philippine representatives in Washington D.C. remained indifferent to the difficulties Filipino laborers faced. The article pressed Filipino leaders in America to form an organization uniting all classes of Filipinos as the only means of saving their countrymen.32

Beginning in 1933, the calls for Filipino organization began to primarily focus on forming agricultural labor unions. DeWitt claimed that 1933 was a crucial year for Filipino organizing efforts, because agricultural wages throughout California had reached their lowest point since before 1910. In addition, newly elected President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). Section 7(a)

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30 Wallovits, Filipinos in California, 8-9.
31 The Philippines Mail, January 1, 1931.
32 The Three Stars, March 1931, July 1932; Philippines Mail, July 24, 1933.

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of the NIRA gave workers the right to organize and bargain collectively with their employers. In numerous articles and editorials, Filipino newspaper editors underscored the need to take advantage of this piece of legislation. An editorial in *The Philippines Mail* noted that "Filipino agricultural workers are the only extensive class of laborers in the state without an organized central body that might submit a code of wages and working hours for approval by the National Recovery Administration." In a call-and-response feature titled "Filipino Laborers' Catechism," *The Philippines Mail* scolded Filipino farm workers for failing to capitalize on Section 7(a) of the NIRA.33

The NIRA became the rationale for the formation of the Filipino Labor Union in 1933. In November, labor leaders from all over the state met in Salinas to discuss the necessity of forming a statewide union. The attendees agreed that agricultural workers must organize under the provisions of the NIRA. One of the representatives at the meeting had received word from the NRA that, although not intended as a measure for agricultural workers, farm laborers were allowed to make "mutual arrangements" with their employers regarding wage adjustments and working conditions.34

At another mass meeting the following month, one of the speakers quoted the opinion of George Creel, administrator of the San Francisco District Recovery Administration. Creel maintained that the right to organize did not depend on whether laborers worked in agriculture or industry. This meeting marked the official organization of the Filipino Labor Union. Rufo Canete, a labor contractor interested in protecting the rights of Filipino farm workers, became the president of the FLU, and the union set forth the following goals.

To promote understanding between Filipino workers and vegetable growers and shippers in the Salinas Valley; to cultivate the spirit of brotherhood among Filipino workers, labor contractors, and businessmen; to work for living wages with a view to improving conditions.35

Canete faced the immediate task of gaining the support of Filipino agricultural workers. To accomplish this, he would have to differentiate the Filipino Labor Union from existing Filipino community organizations. Indeed, a number of mutual aid societies, fraternal brotherhoods, and other organizations offered services to the Pinoy in exchange for a membership fee. Organizations such as the Filipino Federation of America, the Filipino Citizens League, and Mga Anak ng Bukid assisted newcomers in locating

34 *Philippines Mail*, November 13, 1933.
35 *Philippines Mail*, December 25, 1933.

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relatives and friends in addition to helping them find employment. Most of these associations employed patriotic rhetoric to gain new members. Although they might differ in the specific service they offered Filipino laborers, several community organizations promoted the complete independence of the Philippine Islands as well as Filipino solidarity in the name of Jose Rizal, the Filipino national hero who gained fame by opposing Spanish rule.36

In 1930, James Wood interviewed a number of Filipino laborers and discovered that many did not trust Filipino organizations. Wood noted that several laborers had given money to an organization only to discover that the association’s representative had run off with it. This highlights yet another example of Filipino abuse at the hands of their own countrymen. Canete addressed this issue in a speech he gave to the FLU legislative council, lamenting that Filipinos were indifferent to organizing because many organizations had failed to live up to expectations. Canete had his work cut out for him.37

Even though Filipino farm workers viewed organizations with skepticism, the FLU might never have organized without the efforts of leaders representing community associations. The individuals who stepped up to the challenge of unionizing Filipinos on a statewide basis combined organizational experience with a desire to help their people out of desperate living conditions. D.L. Marcuelo, a Stockton businessman active in the Filipino Businessman’s Protective Association and editor of The Three Stars newspaper, helped found the FLU. Marcuelo’s association had protested against wage cuts for farm workers in 1933, and his newspaper frequently criticized Filipino treatment in California.38

The secretary of the FLU, Luis Agudo, was head of the Mga Anak ng Bukid, Inc. and editor of the Philippines Mail. The Mga Anak ng Bukid, an organization that the Filipino press labeled militant, had petitioned the Monterey and Pacific Grove Chambers of Commerce for justice after the Watsonville riots in 1930 and aggressively promoted Philippine independence. Agudo’s newspaper frequently urged Filipino unity and organization and openly criticized American usurpation of Philippine resources and industry.39

The president of the FLU, Canete, also brought organizational experience to the new union, as he had been the president of a labor contractors’ union prior to his involvement with the Filipino Labor Union. In November 1933, the Filipino Labor Supply Association (FLSA) was established after Canete called a mass meeting of labor contractors to discuss the deplorable working conditions for Filipino agricultural workers. He was especially angry that growers had slashed wages to

37 Wood, “Materials Concerning Filipinos,” Box 2, Folder 1; Philippines Mail, February 27, 1933.
38 The Three Stars, October 1, 1930; Philippines Mail, July 4, 1933.
39 The Three Stars, October 1, 1930; Philippines Mail, July 4, 1933.

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fifteen cents an hour, even as they enjoyed profits. DeWitt highlighted this point, claiming that agricultural income increased by fifteen percent in 1933 and “growers enjoyed generous subsidies” from the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. Canete demanded that growers increase farm worker wages and obey California labor laws regarding weekly paychecks. Although contractors often exploited farm laborers, Canete truly took an interest in their welfare. This was exemplified in his decision to leave the FLSA in order to head the FLU, representing the rank and file of Filipino agricultural labor.40

Clearly, Filipino community leaders did more than recommend unionization—they took action to make it happen. The precarious status of all Filipinos in America explains the tendency of Filipino business leaders to support union organization. Though well educated, most community leaders could not practice law, teach in public schools, or own businesses outside the Filipino district, because they were not citizens. Thus, Filipino leaders focused their efforts on helping their countrymen overcome social and economic obstacles in California. Better educated than most Pinoys, but facing discrimination just the same, Filipino community leaders utilized their skills to influence the masses. They became heads of organizations, newspapers, and certain businesses within the Filipino community.41

Additionally, Filipino business leaders relied on Pinoys to patronize their stores. Confined to various Chinatowns, Filipino proprietors constantly competed with Chinese and Japanese business establishments, including restaurants, pool halls, and gambling dens. Filipino businessmen complained that their countrymen were “disloyal and unpatriotic” if they shopped in non-Filipino stores. The interdependency between Filipino business leaders and farm workers, therefore, prompted the former to unionize the latter.42

Filipino union leaders faced a difficult challenge in trying to unionize a transient labor force. In an effort to reach migrant farm workers, the Filipino Labor Union posted circulars throughout Chinatowns and sent union representatives to labor camps, espousing the union’s goals of higher wages, regular paydays, and union recognition. The FLU created seven locals composed of elected committees from each camp.43

Although FLU leaders publicly distanced themselves from communist influence, their organizational strategies closely resembled those of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU). Jamieson explains that the Communist Party of the United States created the CAWIU to organize farm workers in the California fields. In 1933, the CAWIU actively organized Filipino lettuce workers in

40 Philippnes Mail, February 27, 1933; DeWitt, Violence in the Fields, 56.
41 Wood, “Materials Concerning Filipinos in California,” Box 1 Folder 18.
43 Philippnes Mail, March 12, 1934.

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Salinas. The union subdivided into locals, set up "camp committees," and required a majority of the members' approval before implementing decisions regarding policy. DeWitt maintained that Filipinos joined with the CAWIU not because they embraced communist ideology, but to learn methods of organization. He asserted that "[i]n general, Filipinos believed that American Communist labor organizers were intent upon using Filipino farm labor, and for this reason, they never seriously embraced the views of Communist dominated labor unions." During the Salinas lettuce strike of 1934, the methods the FLU employed, such as camp committees, rank and file voting, and resisting arbitration closely matched the strategies of CAWIU-led strikes the previous year.44

By 1934, however, it became increasingly difficult to maintain the "camp committee" strategy, in large part due to the growing influence of the Associated Farmers. Kevin Starr described the Associated Farmers as an interlocking association of growers, shippers, Pacific Gas and Electric and affiliated industries, with strong ties to the local police and sheriffs departments, the California Highway Patrol (CHP), and the State Bureau of Criminal Identification. Starr echoed McWilliams' accusations of "farm fascism" in his portrayal of the Associated Farmers' activities. This organization, with the assistance of law enforcement and Legionnaires, ran union leaders out of town and pursued campaigns to pass anti-picketing legislation in rural counties. The Associated Farmers also utilized the mainstream press to depict agricultural unions as tools for the American Communist Party.45

Manuel Luz, a 1930s Filipino union organizer in the Salinas Valley, in an interview with a UC Berkeley graduate student, described the obstacles union organizers encountered. Luz explained that growers' connections with law enforcement ensured that organizers were kept out of the fields. Additionally, growers began conspiring with Filipino contractors to prohibit union leaders from entering the labor camps. Luz maintained that the pool halls and theaters in Chinatown became the only available venues for union meetings.46

However, even Chinatown locations eventually became restricted to Filipino union leaders. Rufo Canete complained of the difficulties in finding a place to meet during the Salinas lettuce strike of 1934. "To give the striking Filipinos no place to assemble, all pool halls in the Oriental district were ordered closed. Renting of meeting halls to Filipinos has been decreed prohibited," protested Canete.47

44 Jamieson, Labor Unionism in American Agriculture, 83-84, 87-88; DeWitt, Violence in the Fields, 49-50.
45 Starr, Endangered Dreams, 163-165, 174-175; McWilliams, Factories in the Field, 231.
47 Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, 76th Congress, July 1, 1940, 27044.

Julie Sindel
The Filipino contractors' association presented another obstacle that the FLU had to overcome. During the lettuce strike of 1934, the Filipino Labor Supply Association provided non-union Filipino laborers in an effort to break the strike. Ironically, Rufo Canete, President of the FLU, originally established the FLSA in an effort to promote better working conditions for agricultural workers. After Canete's departure in late 1933, the FLSA became more closely allied with local growers. To get around this problem, Filipino labor leaders used the Filipino press to dissuade Pinoy workers from crossing the picket lines. In an article appearing in the September 17, 1934 edition of the Philippines Mail, D.L. Marcuelo appealed to farm workers to remain loyal to "Filipino national pride, honor and integrity." In the article, Marcuelo pleaded with his countrymen to avoid being used as "a wedge to split the rank and file of the workingmen."48

As Filipinos remained steadfast in their decision to continue the strike against Salinas Valley lettuce growers in 1934, efforts to quash the strike became increasingly violent. After the white shed workers agreed to arbitration and returned to work, the AFL publicly scolded the FLU for promoting violence—a reference to newspaper reports that Filipinos beat up other Pinoy workers who crossed the picket lines. However, the AFL failed to address the violence inflicted upon Filipino strikers. The Salinas sheriff's department also remained indifferent to vigilante assaults against Filipino pickets. A white mob fired rounds of shots into Filipino bunkhouses in Rufo Canete's camp, set up to temporarily house several FLU members. The vigilantes then burned the camp to the ground. The response of local law enforcement officials was that the attack had been in self-defense.49

As more than 1,800 Filipino farm workers remained on strike, the Filipino press praised their ability to maintain "unity within their ranks" even as they were "beaten, bludgeoned, and hounded from pillar to post by State police patrol and deputy sheriffs." The Communist daily newspaper, Western Worker, applauded Filipino militancy as "one of the bright pages of American working-class history." However, Canete realized the threat of mob violence and the reluctance of law enforcement to prevent it. Therefore, he decided to end the strike. DeWitt asserted that the Salinas lettuce strike of 1934 was a partial success for the Filipino Labor Union. Although the FLU was granted its demands, the strike resulted in a permanent rift between the leaders of the union.50

Hoping to repeat the resolve demonstrated in the Salinas lettuce strike of 1934, leaders of the FLU called for Filipino workers to join forces with the AFL affiliated Fruit and Vegetable Workers Union in a general strike against the Salinas Valley lettuce industry in 1936. Some members of the

48 The Philippines Mail, September 17, 1934.
49 DeWitt, Violence in the Fields, 93-93, 98.
50 Philippines Mail, September 17, 1934; Western Worker, September 27, 1934; DeWitt, Violence in the Fields, 99.
FLU were reluctant to ally with the AFL, remembering the Vegetable Packers Association’s violation of an agreement to stay out on strike in 1934 until the demands of both unions had been met. When the VPA had agreed to arbitration, FLU leaders felt abandoned and betrayed.

Led by Chris Mensalves, members of the FLU who supported an alliance with the AFL shed workers broke from the FLU in 1936 and created a separate Filipino Labor Union, which remained unincorporated. The new FLU posted fliers that justified the general strike as “a fight of the whole American labor movement,” and warned that the entire labor movement would turn against any Filipinos who continued working in the fields during the strike.51

The unincorporated FLU sent caravans to visit Filipino camps, but the highway patrol frequently intercepted them before they reached their destinations. A member of the Fruit and Vegetable Workers Association described what happened to one of the caravans outside of Watsonville.

Before they were able to get to the fields they were stopped on the highway by vigilantes. Tear gas was thrown and they were forced to run, leaving their cars....59 [pickets] were arrested...charged with disturbing the anti-picket law.52

The FLU was unable to garner enough support to overcome the opposition, and the Salinas lettuce strike of 1936 ended in failure. The Associated Farmers, assisted by Legionnaires, law enforcement, and vigilante mobs, crushed the strike, and the Fruit and Vegetable Workers Union failed to attain any of its goals. For Mensalves, the failure of the strike emphasized the importance of unity among field and processing workers. In 1937, the unincorporated FLU became part of the United Cannery, Agricultural, and Packing Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), a newly established union affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) that focused on working-class solidarity.53

In the same year that the unincorporated Filipino Labor Union became part of UCAPAWA, the Philippine Islands Labor Union (PI) developed out of a second split in the original FLU. The PI, according to Jamieson, was the most important independent Filipino labor union in California until 1939, and it reflected the revival of race-conscious unionization that occurred in the second half of the 1930s. The PI cooperated with the Mexican Labor Union in the Santa Maria Valley, successfully negotiating a favorable agreement with local growers. The success of the PI Labor Union caught the attention of the newly appointed...
Labor Assistant to the Resident Commissioner of the Philippines, Francisco Varona. 54

Varona played a key role in the formation of the Filipino Agricultural Labor Association (FALA), an independent union of Filipino laborers and contractors engaged chiefly in asparagus work in Stockton. Using the Filipino press to advocate the development of “independent unions closely bound to the Philippine government,” Varona argued that Filipinos should not join the AFL or the CIO. 55

In March 1938, Varona called a conference of representatives from all Filipino organizations on the Pacific Coast and established the Filipino Agricultural Workers Union, a strictly Filipino coalition of field workers and contractors working together to improve labor conditions in the asparagus industry. The Filipino Agricultural Workers Union became the Filipino Agricultural Labor Association and, in 1939, won a resounding victory in a strike against asparagus growers. FALA took advantage of the unorganized growers at the peak of asparagus season. In addition, the growers’ stereotypes about Filipinos being physically suited for stoop labor came back to haunt them. The strike paralyzed the industry due to the Filipinos’ monopoly on the asparagus field labor supply. On April 22, 1939, The Philippines Mail reported the strike as a complete success. All 258 asparagus growers capitulated to FALA’s demands for a wage increase and union recognition. 56

FALA extended its organization into other crop areas employing large numbers of Filipinos. The union waged another successful strike in the celery-growing areas of the Sacramento Delta region. After 2,700 workers stopped operation in the celery fields and packing sheds, FALA won most of its demands, including recognition as the bargaining agent for celery field workers. Spurred on by success, FALA continued driving organizing campaigns in areas such as the grape industry in Central California. 57

Filipino farm laborers earned a reputation for militancy as a result of their determination to organize and agitate against the oppressive conditions in which they lived. In his semi-autobiographical novel, America is in the Heart, Carlos Bulosan illuminated one of the reasons Filipinos so keenly resented the discrimination they faced in the United States. He explained that while Westerners are brought up to regard Asian and other “colored peoples” as inferior, Filipinos had been taught to regard Americans as equals. Since most Filipinos received their education in American schools, they learned the ideals of democracy and the notion that “all men are created equal.” Thus, Bulosan notes, “[t]he terrible truth in America shatters the Filipinos’ dream of fraternity. I was completely

54 Jamieson, Labor Unionism in American Agriculture 133, 180-181.
55 The Philippines Mail, February 27, 1939.
56 The Philippines Mail, April 22, 1939.

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disillusioned when I came to know this attitude." No doubt, many Filipinos shared in Bulosan’s disheartening realization.

The story of the Filipino farm worker in 1930s California is one of fortitude in spite of degradation, exploitation, and repression. Filipinos came to the United States for work, but found most occupations closed to them. When they became the victims of mob violence, Filipinos began to demand higher wages to avoid further attacks by white workers, but that only resulted in increased harassment at the hands of growers and local law officials. The average Filipino farm worker was caught in a no-win situation.

Despite the bleak outlook, Filipinos collectively pushed forward in a fight for their rights. Filipino businessmen and newspaper editors advocated national solidarity, conceivably motivated by the need for Pinoy patronage in Filipino shops, or perhaps as an extension of the call for Philippine independence. Regardless of the motive, Filipino community leaders played an active role and utilized the Filipino press to respond to unjust treatment and to promote unionization of farm workers. Moreover, they played a direct role in the formation and direction of Filipino labor unions.

In their unionizing efforts, Filipino organizers exemplified adaptability to the obstacles they encountered. When vigilante groups and local law enforcement blocked Filipino union leaders from organizing in the camps and fields, organizers held mass meetings in Chinatown venues, the only place they could effectively congregate. Taking lessons from the Salinas lettuce strikes of 1934 and 1936, Filipino labor leaders diverged into one of two directions during the second half of the 1930s, either forming strictly ethnic labor unions or allying with international, allied agricultural unions, such as the UCAPAWA. The success of Filipino farm worker unions in the late 1930s served to augment the Filipino reputation for militancy, a characteristic due, in part, to the efforts of the leaders who stepped up to the challenge of organizing their fellow countrymen.

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