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Tomas Almaguer

San Francisco State University, tomasa@sfsu.edu

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KEEPING THE "HOUSE OF LABOR" DIVIDED:
THE ATTITUDE OF ORGANIZED LABOR TOWARD THE
JAPANESE-MEXICAN LABOR ASSOCIATION IN 1903

TOMAS ALMAGUER

The history of racial minorities in California during the last half of the nineteenth century is usually characterized as one of common social oppression, political domination, and economic exploitation. Despite this overriding fact of racial domination, important differences existed in the type of social relations that each group developed with the dominant Anglo-American population in the state. For example, the Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Black, and Indian populations in California were each perceived and treated in strikingly different ways by the various classes within the Anglo population. Nowhere is this difference in attitude toward racial minorities more apparent than in the attitude of organized white labor toward minority groups in the state.

In broad terms, it can be argued that during the initial decades of the American period, roughly from 1860-1890, it was the Chinese worker who was perceived as the most serious threat to the white working class. Serious confrontations between Anglo workers and Chinese immigrants were widespread during this period. This anti-Chinese sentiment later directly shaped the attitude of organized labor toward Japanese immigrants. Arriving in the period shortly after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Japanese laborer, particularly the farm laborer, carried the brunt of white union racism in California into the early decades of the 20th century.

Curiously, the Mexican worker was not perceived in anywhere near the same hostile terms as was Asian labor throughout this period from 1848-1903. One reason for this had to do with the obvious differences in numbers between the Mexican and Asian populations. By the late 19th century, the Mexican population in California was relatively small, numbering around 14,000. The Chinese population in the state, which was predominantly male, reached upward to 100,000 by the mid-1880s. The Japanese population in California quickly outnumbered the Mexican population in less than a decade after its initial influx into the state. By 1890,

the Japanese population was already greater than that of the Mexican in California.

There were a number of other demographic factors that directly contributed to differences in the attitude on the part of white organized labor toward the Mexican and Asian worker. For one thing, the Mexican population, unlike the Asian, was largely concentrated in the rural backwaters of southern California and away from the manufacturing and industrial centers in the northern part of the state. The major conflict between white labor and racial minority workers occurred in developing urban areas, such as San Francisco and Sacramento. It was here that the anti-Chinese, and later the anti-Japanese movement, first emerged and grew in intensity. Additionally, the Mexican population in the state was situated in a part of the state where it was better able to avoid the Anglo labor market for a greater period of time than the two Asian immigrant populations. From their base in southern California, the Mexican population, up to the 1890s, was able to secure employment in various occupational sectors that were carried over from the earlier Mexican rancho economy. During the 1870s and 1880s, a number of Mexican workers were able to work on ranches as vaqueros and ranch hands, while others found employment in the sheep industry as trasquiladores. Overall, the capitalist labor market did not fully develop in southern California until two to three decades after it had been introduced in northern California. By the mid-1850s, northern California already had a well developed capitalist labor market. This occurred first in mining and later in manufacturing. Capitalist employment sectors did not take hold in southern California until the 1880s. It was not until the early decades of the 20th century, with the massive wave of Mexican immigration and the full-fledged development of a capitalist economy in southern California, that Mexican workers would pose the same threat to the white working class in the state that the Chinese and Japanese population had posed earlier.

It is this particular issue, the differences in the attitude of organized white labor toward racial minorities, that will be explored in this paper. In doing so, I will use the Oxnard Sugar Beet Workers' strike in Ventura County during 1903 as a case study through which to examine the view of organized labor toward two particular groups in the early years of the 20th century: the Mexican and Japanese farm laborers.

Brief Overview of the Oxnard Strike of 1903

The Oxnard strike and the formation of the Japanese Mexican Labor Association (JMLA) in the early weeks of March, 1903, is significant in a number of ways. First, the formation of the JMLA represented one of the earliest efforts on the part of agricultural workers on the Pacific coast to unionize. Second, the strike initiated by the JMLA was one of the very first major agricultural strikes in California agriculture, and the first to be successful. Third, the organization of the JMLA represented the first time that different racial minority workers joined together to engage in union organizing. Fourth, the experience of the JMLA with organized labor at the time clearly illustrated the prevailing racist attitude of various segments of the trade union movement. The success of the JMLA had important repercussions on the labor movement at the time and forced it to show once again the extent to which it was truly concerned with organizing all sectors of the working class.

While it is beyond the scope of this presentation to discuss the particulars of the Oxnard strike, a few summary points can be made. The organization of Japanese and Mexican sugar beet workers into the JMLA was carried out under the leadership of Japanese immigrants who comprised two-thirds of the total union membership. The JMLA was initially organized to combat the exploitative treatment of contracted minority workers by the Anglo-run Western Agricultural Contracting Company (WACC). With-

in a year after its organization by wealthy Anglo businessmen in Ventura County, WACC totally undermined the contract labor arrangements in the county that had previously been under the control of minority contractors. By March, 1903, WACC gained virtual control of the right to provide contracted labor for all of Ventura County's major sugar beet growers. One direct result of this was an overall worsening of the already impoverished position of minority farm labor in the area. Through its monopoly on contracted labor employment in Ventura County, WACC was able to purposely overrecruit farm laborers during the harvest season and thus directly create conditions that led to the lowering of farm wages. Through its contract arrangements with those workers it employed, WACC was able to further exploit Mexican and Japanese laborers by forcing them to buy at company-run stores. Workers under contract with WACC were required routinely to purchase goods at these stores at exorbitant prices. Finally, a large number of the contracted laborers recruited by WACC were subcontracted to smaller contractors who, in turn, also received a substantial fee from those minority workers for whom it arranged employment. In this way, recruited minority workers were forced to part with a portion of their wages to both the WACC and the subcontractor it did business with.

It was this exploitative situation that directly led to the Oxnard sugar beet workers strike in late March and early April of 1903. During this period over 1,300 Japanese and Mexican farm laborers joined forces to successfully undermine the monopoly control of the local farm labor market by the WACC. In the course of their strike, a number of JMLA members were jailed, shot and even killed by anti-union forces. Despite widespread opposition by the powerful WACC, local growers, and the Anglo populace of the county, the JMLA was able to gain a clear-cut victory. When the strike was formally settled, the WACC was forced to give up the right to provide contracted labor to over three-quarters of the farms with which it had formerly

done business. A great deal of the success of the JMLA was due to its class-conscious Japanese and Mexican leadership. Through their efforts, the leadership was able to overcome successfully the cultural and linguistic barriers that could have led to serious divisions among the ranks of the JMLA. While it cannot be determined with any certainty, it is likely that the Japanese leadership was influenced by the importation of a Japanese socialist political ideology that found some acceptance among the Issei population at the time of the strike. Through the course of their struggle, the JMLA was also able to receive the aid of a few Anglo socialists whose supportive role was important to their success.

It was in the weeks after the initial success of the JMLA in April of 1903 that the attitude of organized labor toward the new union was crystallized, as will be described below.

*Reaction of Organized Labor
and Significance of the Oxnard Strike*

The success of the Oxnard Strike of 1903 raised a number of important issues for the labor movement. For years trade unions had been indifferent, if not outright hostile, to organizing minorities in industry. They were even less inclined to unionize those employed in agriculture. The JMLA's victory raised, for the first time, the issue of including agricultural workers in the trade union movement. It also forced white labor to spell out its attitude toward the unionization of Japanese and Mexican workers.(1)

The issue of admitting Mexicans, and in particular the Japanese, became an important question both in northern and southern California in the period after the settlement of the Oxnard strike. In an article entitled "Orientals Want to Unionize," the *Oakland Tribune* attributed local union discussion on whether or not to organize Asian workers in Oakland directly to the success of the Ox-

nard strike. In its April 21st edition, the *Tribune* claimed that the "recent strike of about 1,000 Japs and Mexicans at Oxnard against starvation wages and hard treatment has brought the matter to the front."(2)

The official attitude of organized labor toward the JMLA was, from the very beginning, mixed and often contradictory. On the one hand, certain local councils of the trade union movement looked favorably upon the JMLA and pressed for the further organization of Japanese and Mexican workers. This tendency, led by prominent union socialists, also pushed for the serious organization of all agricultural workers and the inclusion of such unions in the American Federation of Labor (AFL). At the other end of the spectrum, various union councils and high-ranking AFL officials were against the JMLA and firmly opposed to any official AFL affiliation with the union. This became the prevailing view of organized labor, continuing labor's anti-Asian position and its general opposition to any serious organization of agricultural laborers.

During the Oxnard strike, individuals from organized labor actively supported the striking Japanese and Mexican sugar beet workers. Two such individuals were Fred C. Wheeler and John Murray. Both were socialist union men from Los Angeles who were affiliated with the Los Angeles County Council of Labor, the California State Federation of Labor, and the American Federation of Labor. Wheeler, a representative of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of Los Angeles was, in fact, the southern California organizer for the AFL. At their 1902 convention in New Orleans, the AFL adopted a resolution to appoint a general organizer in this region for the purpose of aiding in the unionization of unorganized workers.(3) Upon the recommendation of the Los Angeles County Council of Labor (LACCL), Gompers named Wheeler as the organization's official organizer for the southern California region. In addition to his AFL duties, Wheeler was at the same time the state organizer for the California State Federation of Labor (CSFL).(4) Like Wheeler, Murray was an active organizer for the trade union

movement, and later became a leading figure in the Pan American Federation of Labor.

Both men provided valuable assistance to the striking workers. Both took part in some of the negotiation sessions between the JMLA and the WACC. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Murray, whom it described as a "loud-mouthed Socialist," had spoken in behalf of the JMLA in an address to local farmers during one negotiating session. At this meeting, Murray chastised the farmers for not quickly coming to terms with the JMLA and impressed upon them that they should have been thankful that the union was not striking for more than it was demanding.(5) Wheeler also addressed the assembly. While restating the JMLA's demands, he pointed out to local farmers that "you have the beets and we have the labor and want to work directly with you. We are members of the American Federation of Labor and are here to stay. It is bread and butter to us and we will deal directly with farmers."(6) As will be seen, Wheeler's statement, giving farmers the impression that the JMLA was already considered a member of the AFL, was premature. While these comments may have had an impact on the decision of local growers to negotiate directly with the JMLA, they would have little meaning for the AFL leadership.

It was largely the influence of these two men that led the Los Angeles County Council of Labor to adopt a resolution favoring the unionization of all unskilled laborers regardless of race or nationality. Shortly after the shootings in Oxnard, the LACCL unanimously adopted an official statement pledging support of the JMLA. In reporting the passage of this resolution, the *San Francisco Examiner* noted that it represented "the first time that a labor council had put itself on record as in any way favoring Asiatic labor. In the resolution . . . the success of the State Organizer in effecting the unionization of Japanese and Mexican laborers at Oxnard is approved . . ."(7) This resolution, however, included a clear statement of the limits of the LACCL's support of the organization

of Mexican and Japanese laborers. While the LACCL supported organizing those minority workers already in the United States, it reaffirmed its support of the trade union movements's staunch opposition to Asian immigration. An important element of self-interest also played a role in the LACCL's decision to support the JMLA. A section of their resolution read:

Resolved, By the Los Angeles County Council of Labor that we declare our belief that the most effective method of protecting the American workingman and his standard of living is by the universal organization of the wage-workers regardless of race or national distinction.

Resolved, That while we are utterly opposed to the unrestricted immigration of the various Oriental races, we heartily favor the thorough organization of those now here, and believe that the fact that men are able to do our work when we strike is sufficient reason why they should be organized, regardless of race or color.(8)

This resolution expresses the contradictory views of even the most radical elements of the trade union movement concerning the organization of Japanese workers. Behind this call for support of the JMLA, the LACCL acknowledged two things. First, Japanese and Mexican workers could successfully organize on their own; therefore it was in the interest of the trade union movement to include them in their ranks. Second, if left unorganized, these racial minority workers could be used as strike breakers and pose a serious threat to the white labor movement in southern California. The LACCL resolution was seen by many as a radical departure from the prevailing view of other locals in

the AFL.

That self-interest was crucial for this resolution was candidly acknowledged later by P. B. Preble, the secretary of the Oakland Federated Trades Council and a high-ranking member of the AFL. In an interview with the *Oakland Tribune*, Preble discussed the LACCL resolution in the following terms:

This is one of the most important resolutions ever brought to the attention of the [AFL] Executive Council. It virtually breaks the ice on the question of forming Orientals into unions, so keeping them from "scabbing" on the white people . . .

Down there [southern California] the white workingmen have been plumb up against it from Japs and Mexicans who were being imported wholesale Down there, the Union has succeeded in putting this importing company out of business, and the men are now selling their labor at the Union scale, without any cutting by middle men being done.(9)

The message was clear. Faced with the success of the JMLA, the white trade union movement had to respond. The issue of including Mexican and Japanese workers in the AFL was raised only when it could no longer be overlooked. That it was championed by socialist elements in the Federation was predictable. Despite the AFL's position on Asian immigration, the socialist-led unions took a progressive stand on the organization and inclusion of agricultural workers in the Federation. But the question of admitting Mexicans, and in particular the Japanese, became an issue, in Preble's words, only "when the forces of circumstances demands it."(10)

While the left in the trade union movement supported the JMLA, the AFL leadership was hostile. Although the AFL convention in 1894 had formally declared that "working people must unite to organize irrespective of creed, color, sex, nationality or politics," the actions of the Federation frequently belied this stated purpose.(11) In the early years of the AFL's existence, the Federation had insisted that unions desiring affiliation had to eliminate clauses from their constitutions which excluded blacks. However, the Federation soon closed its eyes to this policy, as there existed subsequently at least a dozen affiliates which barred black workers. The leadership of the AFL did not compel any of its affiliates to accept racial minorities into their ranks. A number of rules and regulations were consciously used to exclude non-whites. High initiation fees, special licenses, technical examinations, and prohibitions on becoming apprentices, for example, militated against the admission of blacks into various AFL unions. Finally, in 1900, the AFL abandoned any pretense it had of organizing workers "without regard to race" by officially sanctioning the organization of separate unions for non-whites. Originally designed as a "temporary solution" to the blatant racism among union locals, the AFL policy of separate unions ultimately became a fixed alternative to struggling for integrated unions.(12) Ultimately, the AFL faced a dilemma. It could press for inclusion of blacks into the AFL and lose a number of internationals; or it could focus on expanding the number of unions in the Federation and tacitly sanction the pernicious racism that characterized the unions it brought into the fold. Historically, the AFL chose the latter option.(13)

If the AFL's attitude toward blacks did not forecast its official response to a request for the admission of the JMLA into the Federation, then its early attitude toward Chinese and Japanese immigration surely did. From the beginning, the AFL played an active role in the passage of legislation designed to curtail Asian immigration into the Uni-

ted States. At the first AFL convention in 1886, the federation went on record as being in "full accord" with the sentiment for Chinese exclusion and demanding the "rigid enforcement" of legislation prohibiting further immigration. At nearly every convention that the AFL held up to the turn of the century, the organization passed resolutions supporting this position.(14) In the closing decades of the 19th century, the AFL was important in the Congressional passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and of the Geary Act in 1892 which extended, by another ten years, the exclusion of Chinese labor. In 1901, a year before the expiration of the Geary Act, the AFL published an inflammatory tract by Samuel Gompers and Herman Gutstadt entitled *Some Reasons for Chinese Exclusion: Meat vs. Rice, American Manhood Against Coolieism, Which Shall Survive?* This pamphlet warned of the perils of Chinese existence in the United States and called for the passage of further legislation restricting Chinese immigration. The tract fanned anti-Chinese sentiment in the AFL and directly contributed to the campaign for the passage of the 1902 Chinese Exclusion Act.(15)

Beginning in 1903, the anti-Chinese position of the AFL was broadened to include Japanese, whose increased immigration had made them a larger segment of the working class on the Pacific coast. That the AFL was not interested in organizing Japanese workers and wanted them to be excluded like the Chinese was made clear at their 1904 convention, held in San Francisco. Two resolutions were presented which called for the extension of the Chinese Exclusion Act to include Japanese and Korean workers. A third called for every AFL local to petition Congress for the passage of such legislation. The convention finally adopted a resolution by a delegate from the San Francisco Labor Council which called for the modification of the Chinese Exclusion Act so as to "exclude from the United States and its insular territory all classes of Japanese and Koreans, other than those exempted by the present terms of that Act . . ." It also

called for the submission of the resolution to Congress "with a request for favorable consideration and action by that body." (16) At subsequent conventions, the AFL passed resolutions virtually identical to those passed at its 1904 convention. (17) Thus, the AFL's official attitude toward Japanese workers was essentially an extension of their earlier view of the Chinese. Like the Chinese, the Japanese were seen as a direct threat to the jobs, wages, and working conditions of white labor. Furthermore, the non-white, alien status of the Japanese also contributed to their being seen as a threat to the preservation of the white race and American cultural standards and ideals.

Mexican workers, on the other hand, were not perceived to be the same threat to white labor as were the Japanese at the turn of the century. A number of factors militated against the emergence of widespread white working class opposition to Mexicans. Foremost among these was the legal status of Mexicans as U. S. citizens and their being partly defined as "white" population. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 had extended U. S. citizenship to Mexicans and placed them in the same status as "free white persons." Also important was the greater degree of assimilation that Anglos saw as being possible with Mexicans; the latter's culture and religion were not viewed with the same disdain as were those of Asians. In addition, economic factors tempered anti-Mexican sentiment among organized labor at this time. The late entry of Mexicans into the capitalist labor market meant the absence of a bitter history of competition and conflict with Anglo workers. Additionally, Mexicans were concentrated largely in the rural backwaters of southern California, away from the urban manufacturing centers where white working class opposition to minority laborers emerged first. Finally, the Mexican population was relatively small. (There were, for example, fewer Mexicans than Japanese in California at the time of the Oxnard strike.)

Given the AFL's attitude toward minority labor and their immigration, it was hardly unexpected that the Federation would refuse to comply with the JMLA's request for a charter after the settlement of the Oxnard strike. Following the victory in late March 1903, J. M. Lizarras of the JMLA formally applied to the AFL Executive Council for a charter that would make their association the first agricultural laborers' union and the first union with Japanese members to be admitted to the AFL.

Upon receiving the JMLA's application, which was submitted under the new name of Sugar Beet and Farm Laborers' Union of Oxnard, Samuel Gompers granted the union a charter but stipulated his opposition to any Japanese membership. In his letter of May 15, 1903, notifying Lizarras of his decision, Gompers emphasized clearly that:

It is . . . understood that in issuing this charter to your union, it will under no circumstances accept membership of any Chinese or Japanese. The laws of our country prohibit Chinese workmen or laborers from entering the United States, and propositions for the extension of the exclusion laws to the Japanese have been made on several occasions.(18)

Evidence suggests that after the JMLA's request for a charter was submitted, the San Francisco Council of Labor had telegraphed Gompers expressing their vehement opposition to this request. Although the LACCL had already gone on record as supporting the JMLA, the prevailing union attitude toward the Japanese undoubtedly influenced Gompers' decision.(19)

The reaction of the left tendencies in the AFL to Gompers' action was bitter indignation. In discussing the refusal to grant an AFL charter to all the members of the Sugar Beet and Farm Laborers' Union of Oxnard, a union labor newspaper published in Chicago, the *American Labor Union Journal*,

charged that Gompers had "violated the express principles of the A. F. of L., which states that race, color, religion, or nationality shall be no bar to fellowship in the American Federation of Labor." Furthermore, the *American Labor Union Journal* noted that

It will be impossible, so long as this ruling is sustained, to organize the wage workers of California for the protection of their interests, for there are between forty and fifty thousand Japanese in this state, and nothing can be effectively done without their cooperation. In such a warfare to raise race prejudice is unpardonable folly, a folly for which President Gompers must soon answer to the unions of southern California who are unanimous in demanding recognition for brother wage workers, the Japanese. (20)

There is little evidence, however, that other unions expressed anything but tacit support for Gompers' decision. In Ventura County the local press greeted Gompers' action with great approval. Even before the refusal was made public, one county newspaper had gone on record as opposing the granting of an AFL charter to the JMLA. Shortly after the Oxnard strike was settled, the *Oxnard Courier* strongly criticized the AFL for the aid rendered to the union by Fred C. Wheeler and John Murray. In his commentary on this topic, the editor of the *Courier* wrote:

It seems incredible that the American Federation of Labor, which fought such a gallant battle for the American Workingman at the time of the re-enactment of the Exclusion Laws, should so easily forget its antipathy for anything Oriental as to have ga-

thered into its fold an organization of Japanese and Mexican aliens, extending to them the protection and benefits of its vast influence and sending its delegate to direct a fight against an American company. We do not believe in making fish of one and fowl of another.(21)

Once Gompers' decision was disclosed the *Ventura Free Press* reported to county readers that he "drew the line" on the question of admitting the Japanese branch of the JMLA into the AFL. According to the *Free Press*:

The head of labor of this country holds that Japanese are mongolians and classes them with the Chinese, against whom an exclusion act exists, and that they are non-voters and not entitled to the same privileges as laborers from other countries, including the Mexican.(22)

Gompers' refusal to grant a charter to the JMLA which would allow Japanese membership was denounced unanimously by the Mexican section of the union. Outraged at Gompers' action, the Mexican membership directed J. M. Lizarras to write Gompers what is undoubtedly the strongest testimony of the solidarity reached between the Mexican and Japanese sugar beet workers of Oxnard. On June 8, 1903 Lizarras returned the charter that the Mexican membership of the Sugar Beet and Farm Laborers' Union of Oxnard had received and directed the following letter to the president of the AFL:

Your letter . . . in which you say the admission with us of the Japanese Sugar Beet and Farm Laborers into the American Federation of Labor can not be considered, is received. We beg to say in reply that our Japanese

brothers here were the first to recognize the importance of cooperating and uniting in demanding a fair wage scale

They were not only just with us, but they were generous when one of our men was murdered by hired assassins of the oppressor of labor, they gave expression to their sympathy in a very substantial form. In the past we have counseled, fought and lived on very short rations with our Japanese brothers, and toiled with them in the fields, and they have been uniformly kind and considerate. We would be false to them and to ourselves and to the cause of unionism if we now accepted privileges for ourselves which are not accorded to them. We are going to stand by men who stood by us in the long, hard fight which ended in a victory over the enemy. We therefore respectfully petition the A. F. of L. to grant us a charter under which we can unite all the sugar beet and field laborers in Oxnard, without regard to their color or race. We will refuse any other kind of a charter, except one which will wipe out race prejudices and recognize our fellow workers as being as good as ourselves.

I am ordered by the Mexican union to write this letter to you and they fully approve its words.(23)

In refusing to become a part of the AFL without the Japanese branch of the union, the JMLA ultimately closed the door to any hopes that it might have had of developing the stability and support needed to continue its activities in Oxnard. The

final decision of the AFL not to admit the JMLA as it was originally organized undoubtedly played a key role in ensuring that the union would eventually pass out of existence. A review of newspaper accounts of activities in Ventura County through 1910 failed to uncover any further mention of the JMLA after its victory in April 1903. No other evidence could be found concerning the activities of the JMLA or the exact date at which it ceased to function as an organized union. What appears to have happened is that the union continued to operate for a few years and then disbanded. By 1906 there was already evidence of further discontent on the part of sugar beet workers in Oxnard, but no mention was made of the JMLA.(24)

For years after the Oxnard strike, the AFL persisted in its hostile attitude towards organizing Japanese workers and its indifference towards the organization until 1910 that the Executive Council of the AFL took any steps to bring farm workers into the Federation. These efforts, however, accomplished very little. What organizing drives were initiated by the AFL in the years after 1910 were often designed to work against the common interests of minority farm laborers. According to one authority, the activities initiated by the AFL in that period were explicitly "designed to favor white workers at the expense of Orientals."(25) Finally, during the war years, all efforts to organize farm labor were abandoned altogether by the AFL. With the passing of the JMLA, an important chapter in the history of the labor movement came to a close. Not until the late 1920s and early 1930s was any minority union as important as the JMLA organized in California agriculture.(26)

Conclusion

This discussion of the attitude of the AFL towards the Japanese Mexican Labor Association in 1903 highlights the prevailing attitude of organized labor towards racial minorities at the time.

The trade union movement was at that point still largely, by its own admission, a "white man's movement." At the time that the JMLA was formed, organized labor was still preoccupied with the threat that Asian labor posed to the white working class. It is significant that the Oxnard sugar beet workers strike occurred just one year after the Congressional passage of the act which permanently closed Chinese immigration (in 1902) and five years before the "Gentlemen's Agreement" between Japan and the U. S. temporarily closed off the immigration of Japanese laborers into the country. It is also significant that the strike occurred at a time just before the first major wave of Mexican immigration into the Southwest and before the Mexicano became a major concern to white labor. Given the historical juncture during which the Oxnard strike occurred, it is not surprising that the AFL took the position it did towards the granting of a Federation charter to the JMLA. Given its earlier position towards Chinese immigration and mounting internal animosity towards the Japanese immigrants, it was predictable that the AFL would not grant the JMLA a charter that allowed for Japanese workers to remain a part of the union. The racist attitude of the AFL towards the Japanese membership of the JMLA makes their magnanimous acceptance of the Mexican membership something less than commendable. As it turned out, the AFL's attitude towards Mexican workers was far from one of consistent support. Opportunism, self-preservation and half-hearted gestures of working class solidarity with Mexican workers were to become the prevailing attitudes of the AFL toward the Mexican laborer in the decades that followed the 1903 Oxnard strike.

For those of us interested in Chicano history, there is at least one important lesson to be learned from the brief history of the JMLA. The attitude of J. M. Lizarras and the other Mexican members of the JMLA toward Samuel Gompers' attempt to divide the Mexican branch of the union from the Japanese has to be seen as an inspiration to us all. While the JMLA was ultimately only interested

in securing a needed reform of the exploitative contract labor system, it did show signs of a working class consciousness that is rarely seen today. Instead of acceding to the AFL's cooptive lure, the Mexican section of the JMLA chose to weather an uncertain future rather than compromise their principles and forsake their Japanese coworkers. While this example of true working class solidarity should not be overly romanticized, neither should its lesson be lost to us today.

NOTES

1. Stuart Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin No. 836 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office 1945), p. 53. For brief accounts of the Oxnard strike and its significance to the labor movement, see the following Federal Writers' Project reports: *Oriental Labor Unions and Strikes - California Agriculture* (Oakland, Calif., 1938), typewritten, pp. 11-13; *Unionization of Migratory Labor, 1903-1930* (Oakland, Cal., 1932), pp. 3-4.

For discussions of the Oxnard strike within the context of minority labor history, see: Juan Gomez Quinonez, "The First-Steps: Chicano Labor Conflict and Organizing, 1900-1920," *Aztlan: Chicano Journal of the Social Sciences and Arts* 3 (Spring 1972): 13-49; Karl Yoneda, "100 Years of Japanese Labor History in the USA," in Amy Tachiki, Eddie Wong, and Franklin Odo, eds., *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, pp. 150-158 (Los Angeles: U.C.L.A. Asian American Studies Center, 1971).

2. *Oakland Tribune*, April 21, 1903.

3. *Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor: Held at New Orleans, Louisiana, November 13 to 22, 1902* (Washington, D.C.: The Law Reporter Company, 1902), p. 74. Hereafter, proceedings shall be referred to as *Proceedings, AFL Convention*, with the year.

4. Grace Heilman Stimson, *Rise of the Labor Movement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), p. 208; *Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the California State Federation of Labor, 1903* (Los Angeles: Labor Union News, 1903), p. 61; Philip Taft, *Labor American Style: The California State Federation of Labor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 24.

5. *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 1903.

6. *Oxnard Courier*, March 28, 1903.

7. *San Francisco Examiner*, March 26, 1903.

8. *Oakland Tribune*, April 21, 1903.

9. *Ibid.* That Preble's assessment is correct is corroborated

ted by a resolution that would be submitted by Fred C. Wheeler at the 1903 AFL Convention at Boston, Massachusetts. At this meeting, which was held seven months after the settlement of the Oxnard strike, Wheeler introduced a resolution that called for the extension of the services of the AFL's southern California organizer for another year. In making this request, Wheeler made special reference to the organizational problems that Asian and Mexican workers posed for the AFL's efforts in this area. Wheeler's resolution read:

Whereas, the toilers of the Pacific Coast are facing great hordes of Asiatic laborers, also thousands of peons, whose standard of living is so low that our people cannot successfully compete with them and maintain their own self respect; and

Whereas, the great railroad companies are violating the alien contract labor law by bringing in this cheap labor; and

Whereas, the California unions and the State Federation of Labor have done much good work in the past, but on account of the large area of our state are unable to cover it, but with the assistance of the American Federation of Labor many thousands of men can be unionized; therefore be it

Resolved, That the President of the American Federation of Labor be empowered to appoint a general organizer for California for the ensuing year. (*Proceedings, AFL Convention, 1903*, pp. 103-4.)

10. *Oakland Tribune*, April 21, 1903.

11. *Proceedings, AFL Convention, 1894*, p. 25.

12. Philip Taft, *The A. F. of L. in the Time of Gompers* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), pp. 308-311; Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States: The Policies and Practices of the American Federation of Labor, 1900-1909*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1964), pp. 233-253. According to Foner, the revision of the Federation's constitution to allow for such a practice "was a signal that the A. F. of L. had abandoned even the formality of equal status for Negro workers, and had settled into a fixed policy of Jim-Crowism" (p. 235). Even this approval of separate unions was hardly an adequate solution to the problem that blacks posed to the AFL. It would become a matter of common practice after 1900 that the Executive Council of the AFL would refuse to grant charters to black unions when any international would either refuse to accept them or would not surrender jurisdiction over them (pp. 235-236).

13. This issue was brought to the fore at the turn of the century when a number of unions in the South balked at the AFL's half-hearted pleas that they not discriminate against black workers. Fearful of totally alienating its organizations in the South, or encouraging the creation of a separate Southern labor movement, the AFL acceded to these protests and permitted the policy of organizing separate locals for blacks. (See Taft, *The A. F. of L.*, pp. 312-317.)

In *The American Federation of Labor: History, Policies, and Prospects*, Lewis L. Lorwin argues that the AFL remained a "white man's organization" as late as 1928. In that year the number of black workers in the AFL accounted for only 2 to 3 percent of the Federation's total membership (p. 304). The unions with the largest black membership included the Maintenance of Way Employees (10,000), the United Mine Workers (5,000), the Federation of Musicians (3,000) and the Sleeping Car Porters' Union (3,000) (p. 304ff).

14. Taft, *The A. F. of L.*, pp. 302-305.

15. Samuel Gompers and Herman Gutstadt, *Meat vs. Rice: American Manhood against Asiatic Coolieism, Which Shall Survive?* Reprinted with Introduction and Appendices by the Asiatic Exclusion League (San Francisco, 1908).

16. *Proceedings, AFL Convention, 1904*, pp. 100-101, 108, 172.

17. See, for example, *Proceedings, AFL Convention, 1905*, 189-191, 216; 1906, 287; 1907, 315; 1908, 173; 1909, 329.

18. Samuel Gompers to J. M. Lizarras, May 15, 1903, as cited by Murray, "A Foretaste of the Orient," *The International Socialist Review* 4 (August 1903): 77-78.

19. *Los Angeles Citizen*, February 7, 1930.

20. *American Labor Union Journal*, June 25, 1903 as cited by Foner, *History of the Labor Movement* 3:277.

21. *Oxnard Courier*, April 4, 1903.

22. *Ventura Free Press*, May 29, 1903.

23. J. M. Lizarras to Samuel Gompers, June 8, 1903 as cited by Murray, "A Foretaste of the Orient," 78. See also Foner, *History of the Labor Movement* 3:277.

24. On February 2, 1906, a new organization called the "Co-operative Contracting Company" advertised itself in the *Oxnard Courier* as an alternative to the contracting companies which remained in Oxnard after the 1903 strike. While it was not a union, it did claim to represent the interests of "Japanese labo-

rers" in Oxnard. Their first advertisement in the *Courier* stated:

We Japanese laborers who have been in Oxnard for years, wish to make contracts for the harvesting of sugar beets direct with the growers. Don't make your agreement with other contractors, because for years we laborers have been depressed (sic) by them. Contractors' ill-treatment of laborers is grower's loss directly. We trust them no more. We can and will do better work than has ever been done here. (*Oxnard Courier*, February 2, 1906).

25. Jamieson, *Labor Unionism*, pp. 57-58; Lorwin, *The American Federation of Labor*, p. 110; Federal Writers' Project, *The Migratory Agricultural Worker and the American Federation of Labor to 1938 Inclusive* (Oakland, Calif., 1939), typewritten. See also Federal Writers' Project reports listed above.

26. Jamieson, *Labor Unionism*, p. 58.

Note: This paper is drawn from Chapter Six of *Class, Race, and Capitalist Development: The Social Transformation of a Southern California County, 1848-1903*. (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1979). For a more detailed account, see the fuller treatment of the subject in the dissertation.