

EL CONGRESO IN SAN DIEGO: AN ENDEAVOR FOR CIVIL RIGHTS¹

■
by
Carlos M. Larralde

A pioneering civil rights association, *El Congreso del Pueblo de Habla Española* (the Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples) flourished in Southern California between 1935 and 1950. It promoted civil rights (mainly in working conditions) for Latinos and other minorities. Luisa Moreno (1907-1992), a prominent Latina labor and civil rights activist, helped to organize *El Congreso* along the lines of the National Negro Congress, which had been originated by Communists and other labor movement reformers in 1935 to battle racial discrimination. Chapters spread quickly in California and Texas. Its first national convention was held in downtown Los Angeles on South Spring Street on April 28-30, 1939, attracting 1,000 to 1,500 delegates representing over 120 organizations.² Moreno and other participants drafted plans at the Hotel Alexandria for the protection of the foreign born. They focused on deportation and discriminatory legislation aimed at aliens. Delegates from San Diego described the complex discrimination conflicts that job holders encountered.

At the convention, Moreno cited numerous individual cases of abuse in her effort to inspire members. She brought forward Humberto Lozano, whose face was seriously deformed from a chemical burn in a factory, and the machinist Ambrosio Escudero, who lost three fingers on his right hand due to an accident. She described a Pacific railroad man originally from Sonora who had lost one of his legs and used a wooden peg. She also mentioned instances of Japanese and Filipino workers murdered in rural areas. Moreno explained, "Numerous heart-breaking cases like these prevailed where businesses and police stations made certain no records were kept to hinder law suits and forestall damaging their community image."³

The meeting ended with several panels discussing community issues. "The convention hall was hot and close," John



Luisa Moreno while exiled in Tijuana, Mexico, 1967.
Personal collection of author.

Carlos M. Larralde is an independent scholar who has written several monographs and articles in Mexican American studies. He has a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California, Los Angeles. Dr. Larralde is the author of *Mexican American Movements and Leaders* (1976).

Bright, a Hollywood movie scriptwriter remembered, “yet the several hundred delegates didn’t mind, for the issues before them were hot too, and close to their hearts, and to the bellies of their children.”⁴ Bright’s wife, the vibrant, witty and optimistic Josefina Fierro de Bright prevailed as a fund-raiser. With her husband, she rejuvenated and invigorated *El Congreso*, by engaging the support of actors like the cowboy Gary Cooper, who represented the common individual against evil, the glamorous Susan Hayward and the singer Judy Garland. These prominent entertainers brought in revenue to the organization.

Moreno and Fierro de Bright delivered moving speeches about a better world where ability mattered. They encouraged involvement in the voter registration drives, Fierro de Bright explained, “so that we can shape the law to benefit all levels of society and influence labor bosses and farm growers. We need to have control over the mayor and the judges. We are here to channel into positive ways of thinking and behaving that will help all of us to end the repression that is the source of our misery. The challenge is still there to pave the way for other exploited workers.”⁵

In recent years, historians have attempted to recover the experience of the organizers of *El Congreso*. Mario T. Garcia conducted oral interviews of Bert Corona, which he included in his *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, & Identity, 1930-1960* (1989). His tapes remain in the collections of the University of California, Santa Barbara. George Sanchez also provided valuable insight into the history of *El Congreso* in his *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (1993). Vicki L. Ruiz, meanwhile, has done considerable work on Luisa Moreno and Latina labor activism.⁶ Some archival materials are available in the California State Archives, Sacramento, although portions of important files are not cataloged. These include the reports of the Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California. Others materials, such as the Hearing Transcripts, 1941-1958, the Office Files, 1940-1977, are restricted. A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* entitled “Newly Released State Papers Detail ‘Red Menace’ Era,” describes these controversial materials. Senator Jack B. Tenney’s narratives describing labor and civil rights organizers as dangerous Communists are available at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Nevertheless, scholars find it difficult to research *El Congreso* in Southern California as local organizers destroyed a majority of their papers, fearing harassment by the Senator Tenney’s Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1940s. Moreno described Tenney and his followers as “the spiritual descendants of those who are responsible for obliterating religious art in England, and the Massachusetts Puritans, who smashed and burned whatever they detested.”⁷ Carey McWilliams’ papers have all but disappeared, leaving scholars to work from oral interviews that he gave in the 1970s. Other materials on the history of California’s labor movement are available at the Bancroft Library, Stanford University, UCLA, the Southern California Library for Social Studies & Research, the National Archives at Laguna Niguel and the Huntington Library.

This article draws on my extensive collection of materials relating to *El Congreso* in Southern California. I first met Professor Bert Corona (d. 2001) when I was an undergraduate at California State University, Northridge in the 1970s. He shared his experiences in his lectures on labor issues in the Southwest. Learning of my interest in the subject, he and Luisa Moreno gave me several boxes of their personal papers and photographs. Stanford University has a small portion of Corona’s papers; I have the

rest. I also had extensive conversations in Spanish with Moreno, Josefina Fierro de Bright, Bert Corona and others. I was not permitted to use a tape recorder because these people were blacklisted by California's Un-American Activities Committee. However, I kept notes. In time, I came to know Moreno and Corona's extensive families as well as the sons and daughters of Roberto Galvan and Philip Usquiano. They provided me with further insights into the motivations and activities of these early labor organizers. Mytyl Glomboske, the daughter of Luisa Moreno, gave me numerous papers and photographs of her mother. Bert Corona's wife, Blanche, provided me with information about Josefina Fierro de Bright. I also benefited from conversations with historian Carey McWilliams and his friends

Robert Kenny and John McTernan, lawyers involved in *El Congreso* and active in civil rights for minorities. My work draws on some of their personal files.

The 1930s was a particularly challenging time for Mexicans in the United States. Many immigrants had flooded into the country following the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. Growers profited from this cheap labor, especially in 1929, the year known as "the Mexican harvest." To growers, Mexican families were vulnerable and the growers had the advantage of dictating the working conditions they wanted for the laborers. The old saying was, "When we want you, we'll call you, when we don't – git."⁸ Viewed as ignorant and diseased, Mexicans survived in shelters made of cardboard, spruce-thatched tents or shacks. Scorned by shopkeepers, they rarely ventured into towns. Instead, they either died in the deserts of Imperial Valley or survived in rural areas such as Lemon Grove, Chula Vista, and Otay Mesa.⁹ During the Great Depression, they competed fiercely with immigrants from Oklahoma and the Midwest for a handful of jobs. Thousands of Mexican laborers toiled in the citrus and walnut industry that extended from Santa Barbara to San Diego. Others faced deportation to Mexico after the United States instituted a repatriation program aimed at eliminating Mexican workers.¹⁰

One of the most serious dangers faced by the Mexican community was the aggression of the Ku Klux Klan. The San Diego chapter, known as the Exalted Cyclops Klan, conducted nighttime raids along the Mexican border. They lynched Mexicans and, according to Bert Corona, even used them for target practice. Corona described the aftermath: in the mornings, disfigured bodies lay along dusty roads. In remote farms, skeletons and corpses surfaced. Some were beyond recognition due to the long exposure to the elements while buzzards circled in the sky. "These cadavers represented the forgotten, the abominated," Corona said. "In a way, U.S. border authorities saw the Klan's deeds as a form of Mexican repatriation in the 1930s."¹¹

Coyotes, or border smugglers, were another danger. Fear of the Klan caused many Mexicans to make a border crossing with a *coyote* who provided shelter and food on



Roberto Galvan, 1940, organizer of El Congreso. Personal collection of author.

the trip from Mexico to San Diego and Los Angeles in return for a substantial reward. Once settled in California, workers had to give up a monthly share of their paycheck to the *coyote*. If they failed to pay, the *coyote* either reported them to the border patrols or blackmailed them for exorbitant amounts of money. Some coyotes required payment in advance. They took aliens along backcountry routes, crossing dangerous mountains and rivers, before dumping them in inhospitable terrain. Mexicans often died of dehydration in blazing hot summers of 115-degree heat. In the winter, they faced death from hypothermia.¹²

El Congreso worked to stop the illegal activities of both the KKK and coyotes first by recruiting supporters in the Imperial Valley and San Diego. Union organizers Frank Nieto and Ismael (“Smiley”) Rincon established chapters in the lettuce and cotton fields, the citrus industry, the walnut groves and in factories.¹³ They also founded chapters in National City, Oceanside and Escondido. Philip and Julia Usquiano, Albert Usquiano, Roberto Galvan and Carlos Montalvo showed great determination in their efforts to unionize Latino, Japanese and Filipino workers. Philip Usquiano, in particular, tackled problems with determination. Bert Corona said, “To Usquiano, *El Congreso* had to survive; it had to be evasive, underhanded and daring. He had a hardness and endurance that was essential.”¹⁴

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, *El Congreso* was harassed by local growers who felt threatened by their activities. Bill Karn, born William Karnauskas, grew oranges, avocados, macadamia nuts and other crops at his substantial farm in Fallbrook. He also served as a San Diego County Supervisor. According to Carey McWilliams, he aided the border patrol if he found any of his Mexican workers unionizing.¹⁵ A member of the Ku Klux Klan, he justified his deeds by giving generously to the local Catholic church.¹⁶

Union organizers also faced the hostility of the Klan. In Agua Caliente and other rural areas, the KKK often hanged or tortured Mexicans who defended *El Congreso*. Neuman Britton, the pastor of a white supremacist church in San Diego, identified with Germany’s National Socialist Party and was an active member of the American Nazi Party and the *Order of 76*.¹⁷ He and his associate, William Dudley Pelley, believed that Mexicans, Jews and African Americans were half-human, half-Satan. They also labeled them as Communists. According to *El Congreso* organizer Montalvo, “Britton and other white supremacists preached that *El Congreso* members were Communist spies for Stalin.”¹⁸ They also took physical action. Stanley Hancock, a San Diego journalist and a Communist who composed articles on the plight of Mexican immigrants, was assaulted by the San Diego Ku Klux Klan. He was hospitalized with a fractured jaw and an injury to his spine.¹⁹

El Congreso also tackled the issue of living conditions in San Diego. For the most part, Mexicans lived in poverty-stricken communities, isolated from the rest of the city. Screened behind trees or isolated beyond the railroad tracks, they lived in ramshackle huts and used outhouses. Some dwelled in collapsed automobiles that served as homes. They toiled in nearby citrus groves and packing plants. Thousands of children were born in these places. These families rarely had access to community services such as water, garbage collection, police and fire protection.²⁰

In 1937, the *Comite de Damas del Congreso* (Women’s Committee) was established to care for thousands of children suffering from tuberculosis. They pressured county health officials to test the drinking water of migrant communities in San Diego and Los Angeles. They also attempted to abolish child labor in the fields, to promote a

STOP THE KU KLUX KLAN
MASS RALLY
OLYMPIC AUDITORIUM
 1801 SOUTH GRAND AVENUE
Friday, June 14th, at 8:00 P.M.

ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT W. KENNY, CHAIRMAN
RUSSEL NIXON
 Former Acting Director of Cartel Investigation with the U. S. Military Government in Germany

DR. MAX NUSSBAUM
 Regional President, American Jewish Congress

LENA HORNE **SLIM GAILLARD TRIO**

DRAMATIC SKETCH FEATURING HOLLYWOOD CELEBRITIES

ADMISSION—60¢ (INCLUDING TAX)

*There is no room in Los Angeles for the Fascist way of life.
 We rid the city of Gerald L. K. Smith and his accomplice,
 Meade McClanahan—AND WE'LL KEEP THE KLAN OUT TOO!
 Citizens of Los Angeles — THIS IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY
 Fiery crosses ruthless destruction of property
 threats of murder cannot be tolerated.
 Do your part*

ATTEND THE MASS RALLY

SPONSORED BY

MOBILIZATION FOR DEMOCRACY
 AND 400 SUPPORTING CIVIC, YOUTH, VETERANS', LABOR AND WOMEN'S GROUPS

"Stop the Ku Klux Klan Mass Rally," Los Angeles, c. 1947. Broadside issued by El Congreso to expose the abuses by the Ku Klux Klan under the leadership of Gerald L. K. Smith. Personal collection of author.

minimum wage, and to pass legislation protecting jobholders. They utilized the Spanish-language radio station, known as "Las Noticias del Congreso" to endorse their proposals and to denounce theories of racial supremacy. They also promoted bilingual education with textbooks that explained the historical and cultural background of minorities. They challenged the authority of both Sacramento politicians and local high school principals.²¹

Cesaria Valdez was one of the most outspoken of the Dama volunteers. She worked alongside other volunteers in the county hospitals. By 1940, she had become the vice president of *El Congreso*. She echoed the frustrations of voiceless Mexican, Filipino and African American employees who were discriminated against and abused. Valdez was particularly concerned to denounce the gender discrimination in the job market and violence in the home. Incidents of domestic violence often remained uninvestigated during the 1930s due to lack of state or federal funds. She also confronted the rural poverty. Moreno reported "Cina's (Valdez's) eyes streamed tears as she saw the grim poverty when she walked into their shanties and saw malnourished twig-thin children. She was determined that hungry and forgotten children must have an effective child-care system. With the aid of her vigorous Japanese secretary, Junko, the untiring Valdez promoted government programs and investigations concerning poverty in rural areas."²² Despite her diligent work, she failed to become an advocate for abused children in the cotton fields and canneries. In 1948 she was charged with being a Communist. Her secretary Junko, meanwhile, endured a prison camp during World War II.

In the meantime, Moreno's closest confidant, "Smiley" Rincon, kept himself busy with behind-the-scenes conversations with politicians and businessmen. He handled *El Congreso's* finances and organized chapters in Orange, Los Angeles, and San Diego counties. He also took crates of canned food to impoverished field hands in Southern California and labored tirelessly to generate revenue for the needy. "It was heartbreaking to see a baby drinking coffee because there was no milk," Moreno said. "We tried to stop that."²³

Philip Usquiano also provided leadership. He listened to frustrated members' complaints about FBI harassment, Ku Klux Klan vandalism, beatings by local police and local politicians' resentment. He ate by himself at his desk and performed his duties quietly, without fuss, despite his bouts with spinal meningitis and cancer. He checked up on local chapters in San Diego, speaking to the thin and sallow-faced attendants who worked in warehouses or in the fields. He was cheerful and cordial to the public, returned phone calls, and flattered people by soliciting their advice. He believed that *El Congreso* had troubles enough without encouraging any headstrong or impetuous personnel.

Another important activist, Josefina Fierro de Bright, managed the day-to-day operations of the Southern California chapters of *El Congreso* while, at the same time, attracting writers and movie stars to the cause. Her husband, John Bright, was a Hollywood screenwriter and a founding member of the Screen Writers Guild. Together, they entertained luminaries such as John Steinbeck, Lillian Hellmann, Theodore Dreiser, Orson Welles, Robert Lowell and others. In addition, Fierro de Bright played a major role in curtailing the so-called Zoot Suit Riots, pleading with the *Los Angeles Times* to curtail sensational journalism. She corresponded with Eleanor Roosevelt and helped the administration smooth diplomatic relations with Mexico.²⁴

The work of *El Congreso* had a major impact on writers and reformers in California during the 1930s and 1940s. According to Carey McWilliams, "Valdez and *El Congreso* inspired me to write books on farm and minority issues in California during the bleak 1930s and 1940s."²⁵ McWilliams worked as chief of the Division of Immigration and Housing, inspecting private farm labor camps. He knew, firsthand, of the hostility Mexicans faced in rural communities. "Mexicans were taking white jobs away because whites refused to do that kind of work for that kind of pay," he

wrote. Agents of the Southern Pacific Railroad recruited Mexicans as cheap labor. They worked with farmers to camouflage their exploitation. "Here was a perfect example of how one capitalist entity bailed out another to survive," he suggested.²⁶ He also saw the deplorable housing conditions on San Diego farms and along the Mexican border. *El Congreso* provided him with lists of the most poverty-stricken places. His investigations led the California State Assembly to put forward what was called the "anti-McWilliams Bill" which would have abolished his position and transferred his functions and personnel to the Department of Public Health. Fortunately for him, Democratic Governor Culbert L. Olson pocket-vetoed the bill. When the latter's term ended in 1943, McWilliams again faced the opposition of powerful growers.²⁶

Professor Paul S. Taylor, the husband of photographer Dorothea Lange, joined *El Congreso* in order to gather statistics on the plight of Mexicans. He traveled to San Diego to conduct research in San Diego and the hot, desolate Imperial Valley. He could speak Spanish, although his pronunciation was awkward. He rented an office in downtown San Diego where he slept on a cot in a bare room to escape the inland summer heat. There, he typed and organized his data, written on cards, and spread it out on huge tables. Writers Guy Endore and Theodore Dreiser spoke with Taylor about the plight of Mexican workers during a weekend visit. Lange, meanwhile, said that she hoped her stark photographs would stir the conscience of the nation and promote *El Congreso's* cause. Meanwhile, actor, writer and director Orson Welles sent funds to the organization.²⁸

John Steinbeck was among the most prominent literary supporters of *El Congreso*. He attended two meetings in San Diego, invited by Alfred Montoya, a union activist who later helped Japanese Americans seeking refuge from internment camps. At one of the meetings, he described his involvement with laborers and migrant workers in the Monterey area. As a young man, he talked with Mexican laborers who toiled in the vegetable fields. He also was aware of the fact that growers often deported militant Mexicans. While staying in San Diego County, he noted that merchants, bankers, and professional people supported the landowners, even those who exploited their workers and disregarded their civil rights. This group would label Steinbeck as a dangerous radical. He later admitted that this experience made a critical difference in his novels and films. "Because of us, Steinbeck made drastic changes in his manuscripts. He used to ask us if it should be this way or that way," Moreno noted, "Steinbeck knew a great deal about writing, but we have been Hispanics longer than he has."²⁹

Steinbeck's fascination both with the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the lives of Mexican laborers was revealed in popular movies such as *The Forgotten Village* (1941) and *Viva Zapata!* (1951). Years later, he admitted to Bert Corona and Cesar Chavez, "I



A blacklisted Philip Usquiano, 1948, before California Un-American Activities Committee. He told Senator Jack B. Tenney, "it is only a matter of time before all of us, especially members of minority groups will be persecuted and jailed for holding and supporting any decent idea." Personal collection of author.

tried to enter Mexicans' minds and their lives to enrich my writing and I believe my heart would have shattered if I had not had the Mexican fabric within me."³⁰

Steinbeck also took a leading role in the Sleepy Lagoon Case in 1942, endorsing the release of twelve Latinos for murder and five for assault. His outrage at the way in which the *Los Angeles Times* and the Hearst newspapers portrayed Mexican Americans led him to join *El Congreso* in 1943 following his move to Sherman Oaks. He visited Philip Usquiano in San Diego and provided funds on behalf of *El Congreso* for the Sleepy Lagoon cause. He and Usquiano believed that labor unions could never "put on masks or be phony." They discussed the plight of Mexican immigrants forced to move back to Mexico and they pleaded for reforms. At times, Steinbeck entertained his friends with a symbolic story about love and understanding among peoples, which eventually became his novel, *East of Eden*.³¹

At the start of World War II, *El Congreso* emphasized ethnic patriotism against Fascism and Nazism as the most profound civil rights issue of the era. At a state convention at the downtown Los Angeles Embassy Auditorium in May 1942, organizers urged Latinos to support the war effort and to promote patriotism. They rented an office in the elegant Hotel Alexandria to recruit minorities to join the armed forces. Many Latino soldiers received Medals of Honor. "Smiley" Rincon, however, died on the battlefield. Moreno grieved for him, finding solace only in books. She shared fond memories of him with McWilliams when he visited her in Mexico many years later.³²

During the war, *El Congreso* took up the plight of the 110,000 Japanese Americans who were described as "dangerous enemy aliens" and interned in camps in accordance with U.S. War Department, Executive Order No. 9066. Usquiano and Montalvo smuggled Japanese Americans from San Diego to Mexico. They were aided by Los Angeles' Armando Davila, regional chairman of *Asociación Nacional Mexicano-Americano* (ANMA) and Alfredo Montoya. Davila delivered speeches encouraging Japanese and Mexican Americans to take charge of their own lives and to avoid becoming victimized by brutal discrimination.³³ Montoya, meanwhile, sneaked Japanese Americans into Baja California. Trained for the priesthood, he took his responsibilities seriously. McWilliams remembered, "Tempered in the fire of experience, Montoya acted as a dedicated missionary to serve the suffering. He had that intense predatory vision in his eyes. You knew that he had your better interests at heart."³⁴ He also encouraged the Mexican government to pressure the Roosevelt administration to halt its deplorable abuses towards Japanese Americans and to improve the working conditions of Mexicans and other minorities. By this time, Mexico had mended its diplomatic relations with the world, realizing that the country needed both capitalism and foreign capital to survive.

Montalvo and Montoya worked with difficulty to recruit new members to *El Congreso* during the 1940s. They continued to print leaflets, promote fundraisers, find entertaining speakers, even hire Mexican musicians to entertain their members. Montalvo used both his magnetic personality and his mind, which, according to contemporaries, was a storehouse for an amazing assortment of information. The stoical Montoya, meanwhile, continued to remind his audiences that the crux of their message was to learn the way to share power and to respect each other. *El Congreso* also worked to end discrimination, in particular, a law that prohibited whites from marrying minorities. In 1948, the 76 year-old law finally was declared unconstitutional.³⁵ However, the organization's zeal for ethnic tolerance and Indian rights created considerable public-relations problems, particularly when it used the historical incident of

SPEAK UP NOW... Or you may be shut up later!

The Eastside Committee of the Civil Rights Congress brings to our Boyle Heights community the opportunity to protest the conviction for the alleged advocacy of force and violence of the 11 Communist leaders in New York.

Who has been practicing force and violence in our community, the progressives or those who harass and beat up our Mexican-American youth?

Why is it that the government does nothing to stop Gerald L. K. Smith, the K.K.K., the Peekskill rioters, who practice violence against minority groups, when 11 people with a long record of fighting for the equality of all peoples are prosecuted?

Hitler attacked the Communists first, but all freedom-loving people followed. Let's defeat the Hitler pattern here!

HEAR!

BEN MARGOLIS

Labor Attorney — Well-known Community Leader

CELIA RODRIGUEZ

of Civil Rights Congress

JACK FOX

Businessman — City Terrace Civil Rights Congress

Thursday, Nov. 17th — 8:00 P. M.

FOLK SHULE, 420 N. Soto St.

Entertainment - - ADMISSION FREE

Auspices: Eastside Civil Rights Congress, 307 S. Hill St., L.A. 13, MA. 6-5121



"Speak Up Now...Or you may be shut up later!" Broadside advertising talks by labor attorney Ben Margolis and El Congreso's Celia Rodriguez. A month later, Rodriguez was brutally beaten by the KKK and left for dead along a road in Anaheim.



"Birds of a Feather," political cartoon issued by a local Los Angeles newspaper in 1951, this cartoon illustrated Senator Jack B. Tenney and his allies. Shortly thereafter, *El Congreso* members copied the cartoon and distributed it in a leaflet. Personal collection of author.

the 1775 Indian Revolt in San Diego as the earliest example of abuse by Franciscan missionaries.³⁶

The rise of Communism and the beginning of the Cold War at the end of the 1940s signaled the end for *El Congreso*. The organization was labeled "Communist" and its members and organizers were targeted by the powerful Senator Jack B. Tenney, chair of the California Legislature's Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities. "McCarthyism" flourished in California, supported in part by groups of stubborn and pious Latino merchants who, according to McWilliams, almost prostrated themselves before Tenney.³⁷ The Senator believed that *El Congreso* was a training ground for Communist guerillas and a station for the recruitment of spies for the Soviet Union. He systematically and remorselessly cited *El Congreso* as a Communist-front and claimed that it passed out Communist literature in the Wilcox Building in downtown Los

Angeles. He described the San Diego organizers as part of "the Stalinist gang." When challenged, his temper, always short-fused, would explode. Members of his committee, influenced by Texas Senator Martin Dies's hearings, believed that Mexican American labor union leaders all along the border were Communists.³⁸

Historians Garcia and Sanchez believe that *El Congreso* was part of a "Popular Front" strategy designed to inspire ethnic minorities in the United States to join Communists worldwide in a fight against racial and class oppression. It remains impossible to say who was a Communist, a Marxist or a liberal. Those who argued with the opportunistic Tenney endangered their careers and faced blacklisting or criminal prosecution.

The pressure brought about by the Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities led many people to disassociate themselves from *El Congreso*. Latino performers such as Lupe Velez, Arturo de Cordova and the striking Gilbert Roland ended their involvement with radical Hispanics.³⁹ According to historian Mario Garcia, "*El Congreso* lapsed into a state of limbo and effectively ceased to function."

The anti-Communist hysteria orchestrated by Tenney wreaked havoc on personal lives. Some *El Congreso* members like Roberto Galvan were incarcerated in the Terminal Island Prison, San Pedro, part of the Federal Prison System. Galvan later died from cancer in 1958. Others were deported, including *El Congreso's* secretary and treasurer Alma Santos and Luisa Moreno. Santos cried bitterly on leaving San Diego for Canada. Like many others, she was forbidden to return to the United States upon penalty of imprisonment.

During the 1950s, blacklisting flourished. So did threats and intimidation.

Tenney's committee redbaited Usquiano and his relatives. Several *El Congreso* members shot themselves to spare their families from the Tenney committee. Blacklisted families suffered poverty, depression, slander and abuse, and mental distress.⁴¹ By 1950, the committee had seized *El Congreso's* records and had begun to erase its controversial cast of characters from the California legacy.

In 1982, a weary Montalvo considered the legacy of the movement: "*El Congreso* during the 1930s and 1940s taught us that we need to get a grip on the country and get our own trustees to powerful institutions and run the schools that serve our communities." He wrote, "*El Congreso* has emerged as a bitter declaration to us that discrimination survives where ignorance prevails when we least suspect it."⁴² Moreno pointed out, "*El Congreso* energized Latinos to get out there and do things. It gave us the spirit that there are no limits and that you can just keep going, just keep soaring."⁴³

Years later, a rejuvenated and invigorated *El Congreso* was resurrected in San Diego as part of the progressive *La Hermandad Mexicana Nacional* (the Mexican National Brotherhood). Its most farsighted and enduring legacy was to inspire other immigration-rights groups into the twenty-first century, including the active MALDEF, which argues that immigration enforcement and reforms should be left to the federal government. Above all, *El Congreso* shared its experience of tackling harassment, promoting unity and discipline, and handling rapid political shifts. This organization endured in an uncertain world, managed to keep its dignity, and continued to serve as a fountain of hope. This narrative is their testimony.



Bert Corona, 1972, during a Chicano demonstration to promote civil rights. Personal collection of author.

NOTES



1. The author thanks Dr. Molly McClain for her editorial assistance.
2. Their first national convention was to have been held at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, but rumors of the organizers' Communist sympathies caused a change of venue.
3. Luisa Moreno, interviewed by author, April 17, 1971. See also "First National Congress" and "Resolutions Adopted by the Second Convention of the Spanish-Speaking People's Congress of California," December 9-10, 1939, Ernesto Galarza Collection, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University.
4. Quoted in Mario T. Garcia, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, & Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 151; Luisa Moreno, interviewed by author, April 17, 1971; File on 1940s political activities, Luisa Moreno Papers, Box 2, File 3, author's personal collection. See also Declarations of Intention and Petitions for Naturalization, Record Group 21, National Archives, Laguna Niguel, CA.

5. Josefina Fierro de Bright, interviewed by author, Summer, 1985; Luisa Moreno, interviewed by author, April 17, 1971.
6. Garcia, *Mexican Americans*; George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Vicki Ruiz, "Una Mujer sin Fronteras: Luisa Moreno and Latina Labor Activism," *Pacific Historical Review*, 73, no. 1 (February 2004), 1-10; Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
7. Luisa Moreno, interviewed by author, April 17, 1971.
8. Warren A. Beck and David A. Williams, *California: A History of the Golden State* (New York: Doubleday, Inc., 1972), 443.
9. Joan Emery Young, interviewed by author, May 16, 1984. She was the daughter of Edwin Emery and lived for many years in rural Southern California, notably in San Diego County. For more on Mexican workers in rural areas, see the Manuel Gamio Collection, Z-R, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
10. Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 50-93. See also Nancy Gibbs, "The New Frontier: A Whole New World," *Time*, June 11, 2001, 42-48.
11. Bert Corona, interviewed by author, April 25, 1980. See also Carlos M. Larralde and Richard Griswold del Castillo, "San Diego's Ku Klux Klan, 1920-1980," *The Journal of San Diego History*, 46, no. 2 and 3 (Spring/Summer 2000), 69-88.
12. Bert Corona, interviewed by author, April 25, 1980; See also Ken Ellingwood, "Results of Crackdown at Border Called Mixed," *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 2001. Reports stated that migrant crossings became riskier but found no evidence of a decline. See also Terry McCarthy, "The Coyote's Game," *Time*, June 11, 2001, 56-60.
13. Luisa Moreno, interviewed by author, April 17, 1971; Sam Kushner, *Long Road to Delano* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 70.
14. Bert Corona, interviewed by author, April 25, 1980.
15. Carey McWilliams, interviewed by author, June 12, 1979; Edwin Emery (1904-1986), interviewed by author, May 16, 1984. Emery knew Karn well and was eyewitness to agricultural labor abuses that Mexicans endured during the 1930s and 1940s.
16. *El Congreso* had to deal with a hostile Catholic clergy who warned Latino parishes of dangers facing employees who participated in Communist efforts to disrupt workshops and harvests. Even the Rev. Thomas J. McCarthy, Catholic editor and scholar, and vocal leader Bessie H. Cooper of the San Diego American Legion Auxiliary viewed *El Congreso* with contempt. Afraid to create petty squabbling in *El Congreso*, Moreno said, "I avoided irritating issues such as the church; my focus was on employment abuses." Luisa Moreno, interviewed by author, April 17, 1971. Father Thomas J. McCarthy later joined Senator Jack B. Tenney, chairman of the California Un-American Activities Committee to crush labor and civil rights organizers as dangerous Communists. See Caroline Walker, "Speakers Assail Reds," *Los Angeles Evening Herald*, March 10, 1949. On Bessie H. Cooper, see "Legionnaire Heads Citizens' Group," *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 1948. Cooper supported Tenney. See also Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California's Farmworkers, 1870-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 261-280.
17. "White Supremacist Leader Dies," *Los Angeles Times*, August 21, 2001; Carey McWilliams, *It Can Happen Here: Active Anti-Semitism in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: privately printed, 1935).
18. Carlos Montalvo, interviewed by author, January 7, 1992; Mario T. Garcia, *Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 291.
19. Luisa Moreno, interviewed by author, April 17, 1971; Kushner, *Long Road to Delano*, 72, 76. Pat Toohey, veteran Communist party organizer, was editor of *La Voz del Obrero*, popular throughout the U.S.-Mexican border region.
20. Carey McWilliams, *Southern California Country, An Island in the Land* (New York: Duell, Sloan, Pearce, 1946), 219. See also Charles Wollenberg, "Carey McWilliams, Reformer as Historian," *California Historical Quarterly*, 52 (Summer 1973): 173-180. Unfortunately, most of McWilliams papers concerning American agriculture and its dislocated workers in the 1930s have vanished. One can only speculate about the amount of data that he must have gathered on *El Congreso*. Only the Sleepy Lagoon Committee's files have survived at UCLA. At one time, there were numerous archives relating McWilliams to several Mexican-American organizations. These records disappeared when Tenney listed these Latino groups as Communist affiliated.

21. Luisa Moreno, interviewed by author, April 17, 1971; Bert Corona, interviewed by author, April 25, 1980; *La Opinion* (Los Angeles), May 18, 1941, August 24, 1941, April 17, 1971.
22. Luisa Moreno, interviewed by author, April 17, 1971; Garcia, *Mexican Americans*, 164-165. See also *La Opinion* (Los Angeles), August 12, 1939, December 12, 1939, February 23, 1941.
23. Luisa Moreno, interviewed by author, April 17, 1971.
24. Blanche Corona, personal conversation with author. Their dinner parties were catered by a chef who was later discovered to be an FBI informer. During the 1940s she was under constant FBI surveillance. According to Blanche Corona, she became adept at spotting agents, even inviting them into her house for a glass of wine late at night. She had several romantic affairs with FBI men, including agent George Herbert who persuaded the California Un-American Activities Committee to postpone their examination of her case. Fierro de Bright followed his advice and traveled to Guaymas, Mexico, where she kept a low profile for several years.
25. Carey McWilliams, interviewed by author, June 12, 1979.
26. Carey McWilliams, interviewed by author, June 12, 1979.
27. Carey McWilliams, interviewed by author, November 12, 1977; Robert E. Burke, *Olson's New Deal for California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), 161.
28. Paul S. Taylor, interviewed August 12, 1973; Paul S. Taylor Collection, 74/187, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Carey McWilliams, interviewed by author, November 12, 1977; Bert Corona, interviewed by author, April 25, 1980. For more information on Taylor's research and his problems with the academic world, see Abraham Hoffman, "An Unusual Monument: Paul S. Taylor's Mexican Labor in the United States Monograph Series," *Pacific Historical Review*, 45, no. 2 (May 1976), 255.
29. Luisa Moreno, interviewed by author, April 17, 1971.
30. Bert Corona, interviewed by author, April 25, 1980; See the illustrations in John A. Britton, *Revolution and Ideology: Images of the Mexican Revolution in the United States* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995).
31. Bert Corona, interviewed by author, April 25, 1980.
32. Luisa Moreno, interviewed by author, April 17, 1971; Garcia, *Mexican Americans*, 166; "Call to the Fourth State Convention of the Spanish Speaking Peoples Congress of California," Manuel Ruiz Papers, Box 5, Folder 12, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University.
33. As a member of the Civil Rights Congress, Davila continued to speak against the deportations during the McCarthy era. For more information on Davila, see letter of Shifra Meyers, Administrative Secretary to Grace Nelson, November 30, 1949, Carey McWilliams Papers, Box 1, File 4, author's personal collection.
34. Carey McWilliams, interviewed by author, June 12, 1979; Garcia, *Mexican Americans*, 205-208. For further insights into Montoya's personality, see *Eastside Sun* (Los Angeles), January 31, 1952; *The Union* (Los Angeles), December 7, 1951 and July 28, 1952.
35. Grace E. Simmons, "California Sanctions Mixed Marriages," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 7, 1948.
36. Bert Corona, interviewed by author, April 26, 1980.
37. McWilliams, *Witch Hunt: The Revival of Heresy* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1950).
38. *Herald-Post* (El Paso), March 11, 12, 26, 27, 1940; *California Legislature: Fifth Report of the Un-American Activities in California. 1949* (Sacramento: Government Printing Office, 1948); *Report of the Un-American Activities in California* (Sacramento: Government Printing Office, 1948). See also Huntington Library President Robert Allen Skotheim, *A Generational Perspective* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 2001), 12-13.
39. Carey McWilliams, interviewed by author, June 12, 1979; Floyd Conner, *Lupe Velez and her Lovers* (New York: Barricade Books, 1993), 204, 232.
40. Garcia, *Mexican Americans*, 171.
41. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 245; Garcia, *Mexican Americans*, 153-55.
42. Carlos Montalvo, interviewed by author, January 7, 1992. See Jack Williams, "Carlos Montalvo 82; active in early days of Chicano movement," *San Diego Union Tribune*, February 15, 2000. See *Report Joint-Fact Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California. 1940* (Sacramento: Government Printing Office, 1940), 33.
43. Luisa Moreno, interviewed by author, April 17, 1971. She used to say, "If you lose your historical roots, the will easily disintegrate."