

# Unions Move to Organize Illegal Aliens in the West

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**LOS ANGELES, June 2 — Cecilia Martinez is shy and cannot speak English.**

But not long ago Mrs. Martinez, a 29-year-old native of El Salvador and the mother of three children, complained to a foreman that only three small fans had been provided to cool the area where 50 illegal aliens were operating sewing machines in a garment plant where she worked.

And when she was rebuffed she began a fight that eventually won the aliens not only more fans but also a contract be-

tween the employer and the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union.

The victory won by Mrs. Martinez, who now has a work permit and is no longer an illegal alien, was a milestone in a bitter labor battle in California that has echoes of the long and occasionally violent drive to unionize Jewish and Italian immigrants in New York City's garment industry more than 70 years ago.

Despite their vulnerability to deportation, illegal aliens from Mexico and other Latin-American countries have begun to assert themselves in an industry that, according to state investigators, exploits their illegal status by paying low wages

and providing working conditions that are sometimes as dismal as those of New York's sweatshops at the turn of the century.

Last January, after an investigation of the garment industry, the California Division of Labor Enforcement said that 999 of 1,083 manufacturers were violating state minimum wage and overtime laws; that 376 did not have workers' compensation insurance, and that many others were violating child labor laws and other state statutes.

Garment industry executives deny ex-

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# Illegal Aliens in California Push Union Drive in Spite of Vulnerability

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exploiting the illegal immigrants, saying that they are employed only because legal residents of the United States will not take the jobs they offer. Union representatives contend that if the garment workers' wages were not kept depressed by this large pool of cheap alien labor, wages would rise high enough to attract nonaliens.

For many years, union leaders in the United States ignored the flood of aliens who entered the country illegally, and when they did begin to acknowledge the aliens they fought in Congress for controls to halt the tide of cheap labor.

But here in the West, where illegal entrants make up a growing proportion of the work force, several unions are actively seeking to organize the illegal aliens.

## Farm Workers Sign Contract

In Arizona, the first contract specifically covering illegal alien farm workers was signed this spring by a grower whose operation is partly owned by a brother of Senator Barry Goldwater, Republican of Arizona.

In California, the retail clerks' union has begun a drive to organize illegal aliens in some occupations. And in the state's booming garment industry, three unions — the I.L.G.W.U., the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union and the United Garment Workers Union — are attempting to organize them.

Union officials concede that so far they have had more failures than successes; many of the illegal aliens, they say, are afraid to join the union because they fear they will be deported. Moreover, the labor officials assert that many employers, especially in the intensely competitive garment industry, call in agents of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to arrest any workers who become union activists.

"All the employer has to do is say that they're thinking about calling Immigration and the employees get panicky," says Maria-Elena Salazar, 26, the college-educated daughter of migrant farm workers from Fresno who is one of the I.L.G.W.U.'s 14 organizers here.

## 'Better Than What They Had'

"But I think the fear of losing their job is probably greater than the fear of the Immigration Service," she continued. "They're afraid that if they do join they will lose their jobs. The problem is that when they come here from Mexico or some other country, even the minimum wage, \$2.90 an hour, is better than what they had before."

Over the last decade, California has developed a garment industry second in size only to that of New York. Its sales this year are expected to reach \$3 billion, as against estimated sales of more than \$7.5 billion for New York's garment industry.

More than 100,000 workers are employed in California's garment industry, about 60 percent as many as New York's. Industry and labor leaders here agree that perhaps more than 80 percent of the garment workers in California are of His-



The New York Times/Michael Dressler

Cecilia Martinez at work in a garment manufacturing plant in Los Angeles. While working at another company, she complained about lack of fans. Her complaint eventually led to unionization of the illegal aliens working there.

panic origin and that the majority of them have entered the United States illegally.

The industry, concentrated in the southern part of the state, ranges from large manufacturing plants employing more than 1,000 people to small job shops in hundreds of private homes, garages and small stores where a handful of illegal aliens turn out apparel at piece rates, working for subcontractors who supply the larger manufacturers.

## Little Headway Thus Far

Philip Russo, the I.L.G.W.U.'s chief organizer here, said that the union had decided to break from the labor movement's "no-aliens" stance after realizing that it would have to represent illegal aliens if it was going to continue representing garment workers.

Thus far, the unions have made relatively little headway. Cornelius Wall, an international vice president of the I.L.G.W.U. here, said the union had recruited only about 10,000 members in California and estimated that other unions, in all, had about the same num-

ber. This would amount to only about 15 percent of the total employees in California's garment industry.

"What we're seeing is a total repeat of the early 1900's," he said. "The immigrants then were Jewish and Italian; now they're from Mexico. The job's about the same."

Mr. Russo maintains that many employers systematically use the Immigration and Naturalization Service as a tool to thwart unionizing efforts.

"I first realized what was happening in 1975, when we had a strike with 20 people on the picket line and pretty soon an I.N.S. van appeared and took away 17 of our members," he said.

## 'Collusion' Is Charged

Mr. Russo also said that some agents of the immigration agency "act in collusion" with employers, and that often the only alien employees picked up by some agents were union activists. Officials of the immigration agency deny that they interfered in labor disputes.

For their part, garment industry executives contend that competition in the in-

dustry is so severe that it would be economically suicidal if they stopped dealing with the job shops or signed their own contracts. They said that if they did not use cheap labor, their competitors would.

Some union leaders privately acknowledge that they have sympathy for this argument and assert that one of the roots of the problems is the loose structure of the garment industry, which encourages under-capitalized entrepreneurs to enter the business. These newcomers are induced to cut corners wherever they can, including the use of subcontractors who use alien labor.

"This industry is so highly competitive that everybody's trying to chisel," Mr. Russo said. "What they do is chisel on the human element."

## Aliens Make Drive Difficult

With a growing pool of cheap labor as more illegal aliens enter the country, he added, the drive to unionize the industry will probably remain difficult.

But he was optimistic, and spoke with pride of the success of Mrs. Martinez, who became a union organizer out of desperation.

"I went to see my supervisor and said we needed more fans, the heat was incredible," she said through an interpreter. "He shouted at me, and asked what do you mean, 'we?' When he said, 'You're only one person,' I asked, 'You want to see other people?'"

"Then I went and got the other operators and we stopped the entire operation; we said, 'We want more fans.'"

A few days later the plant did have more fans, and soon after that the illegal aliens at the plant voted, 131 to 11, to be unionized.

Mrs. Martinez no longer works there; she found her situation too uncomfortable. Two weeks ago she was granted a work permit, however, and so is not an illegal alien now.

The workers still at the plant have begun to reap the benefits of their first negotiated contract. Over a period of three years, their hourly wage will go up to \$3.95.