

Hispanic American Movement

The Hispanic American Movement within the United States is frequently excluded from history textbooks and overshadowed by other movements that received more documentation. Throughout U.S. history, generations of Hispanic immigrants have experienced racial oppression in all strains of their lives. Hispanics comprise the largest minority in the U.S., yet through racism and immigration battles this community has been continually barred from the Myth of Meritocracy that was originally advertised before their resettlement in the U.S.. Since 1903, there has been minimal documentation of the struggle of Hispanic Americans. However, after 1945 and throughout the Civil Rights Movement, Hispanic Americans began to gain ground in their fight for equality and historical representation. During the Civil Rights Movement the Chicano Movement was an underlying force in defying injustices. The Chicano Movement is an umbrella term that includes activist groups, acts of resistance, and successes in the fight for equality within the Hispanic American Movement. There were three key elements of the Chicano Movement that persisted in rejecting the racial biases bestowed upon Hispanic Americans. This included, an organization known as the Young Lords Movement, an agricultural debate known as the Delano Grape Picker Strike, and lastly a court case known as Mendez vs. Westminster that improved education policies for Hispanic American students in public schools.

The Young Lords Movement made their first appearance on a Sunday in 1969. El Barrio, a Puerto Rican community in East Harlem, was experiencing sanitation neglect from New York City. For multiple weeks trash had been mounting in the streets, however, the Sanitation

Department refused to clean up and give the same attention to El Barrio as they did to predominantly white neighborhoods. As trash continued to fester, and the neighborhood complained to city employees, the Young Lords planned tactics to clean their streets, while drawing attention from the city. On Sunday, the Young Lords dragged all the trash into the middle of streets, creating barriers over four feet tall, blocking traffic. They lit the trash on fire, and watched as flames engulfed city blocks. As the New York City Police Department arrived in El Barrio, they were met with an onslaught of rocks and chanting protesters, led by the Young Lords. This original act against New York City's sanitation neglect brought attention to the Young Lords and helped them recruit new members. The group consisted of Puerto Rican students attending Columbia University, SUNY Old Westbury, and Queens College. Inspired by the Black Panthers and the Young Lords of Chicago, the New York Young Lords began community organization around education equality and workers rights. They focussed on training younger students to become activists for Hispanic rights, while also using community response to direct their actions. As strains of Young Lords appeared in other East Coast Cities, their effect on the community increased. Health care became a major focus, helping to create more opportunities for young children. Groups like the Young Lords, and its West Coast partner, the Brown Berets, helped empower students to defend their rights and rebel against the systemic injustices they faced daily.

On September 8, 1965, Filipino Grape Pickers walked out in strike against the Delano-area wine and grape producers. After decades of unfair wages and dangerous work conditions, members of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) left their California area picking posts and went to the streets. While Delano is claimed as the beginning of this 5 year strike, Larry Itliong, head of the AWOC, led the original walk out in Coachella, California, where the grape harvest begins. After laborers won a 40 cent-an-hour wage

increase, Itliong moved on to lead the Delano Grape Pickers in strike that same year. Two weeks after the Delano Grape Pickers walk out, in order to gain national attention, the laborers asked Cesar Chavez to join the strike with his union that comprised of Latino farmers known as the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). Chavez initially believed that the Delano grape pickers were not prepared to withstand the time that radical change requires. Although he had reservations about joining the AWOOC and the NFWA, due to the negative history between Filipino and Mexican workers, spurred on by plantation owners, Chavez persisted, and insisted that both parties share striker facilities and picket lines. After a vow of nonviolence, Chavez led thousands of strikers on a 300 mile march from Delano to Sacramento, California. With support from other unions, churches, students, and civil rights movements, laborers left behind financial security, and continued to strike, asking for \$1.40 an hour plus 25 cents per box of grapes picked. After two and half years, discussion of violence began. Young men became impatient, seeing no successful end to the strike. Chavez, in turn, fasted for 25 days, and then assisted in organizing a massive grape boycott throughout the United States. Households around the country dismissed and boycotted grapes, and finally in 1970, grape producers finally signed a contract to end the strike. Ten thousand workers were given union representation and \$1.80 per hour plus 20 cents per box picked. Laborers also received health insurance, and safety limits on pesticide use. The Delano Grape Pickers are a historic example of perseverance in unfair, racially charged, work environments. Those who participated in this strike furthered the Hispanic American Movement and demonstrated the importance of immigrants in the United States economy.

In 1946, a class action lawsuit known as Mendez v. Westminster helped to challenge the constitutionality of “separate but equal” schooling in Southern California. Mendez v. Westminster attempted to end racial segregation in California, before Brown v. Board of Education was

passed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954. After the doctrine “separate but equal” was ruled constitutional in 1896, California separated Chinese, Japanese, and Native American students from white students. Although Mexican American students were considered “white” under the 1940 U.S. census, more than 80% of Mexican American students in Orange County, California were still separated from their “whiter” counterparts throughout their education. This separation was manifested in the idea that Mexican American students knew little to no English and retained no learning potential. Schools designated for Mexican American students taught only vocational skills and did not prepare students for higher education. During the 1940s, Mexicans were the largest minority group in California and almost all agricultural workers were Mexican. These statistics caused California school districts to believe that high quality education was unnecessary for Mexican students, under the assumption that they would all eventually work in the fields. Resources were scarce at these schools, and only English-speaking teachers were employed. In 1943, Gonzalo Mendez attempted to enroll his children in a majority white school in California, however the Mendez family was denied access due to their Mexican heritage. With assistance from four other fathers, whose children had also been forced into Mexican American schools, Gonzalo became the lead defendant in the first class action lawsuit at the federal level that challenged primary education segregation. By claiming that Mexican Americans were considered white, and therefore entitled to go to school with other white children, that there was negative social and developmental impacts created by separation on students, and that segregation in school violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, Mendez won his case against four school districts in California. *Mendez v. Westminster* gave Mexican students the opportunity to achieve higher education and set the grounds for *Brown v. Board of Education*.

By learning about the Hispanic American Movement post 1945 one can understand the influences this movement has had on the United States and all Civil Rights work. The Young Lords Movement demonstrated the strength of communities while fighting oppression and systemic racism. The Delano Grape Pickers Strike was a televised act of resistance that showed the United States that unfair working condition would not be tolerated. And finally, Mendez v. Westminster enacted change in education for Mexican American students in California and helped to catalyze de-segregation laws across the United States. The Hispanic American Movement is essential to the history of the U.S., but frequently forgotten, and overshadowed by other events of this time. Recognition and comprehension of these historical events help paint the story of oppression that Hispanic Americans experienced in the U.S..

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