

5a – United We Stand

The coming together of diverse ethnic groups during the Lawrence strike was an unusual event, although not unprecedented. In 1903, two groups of immigrant field laborers joined forces to form a union, the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association (JMLA) in Oxnard, Calif. The JMLA was the first major agricultural labor union in the United States formed by different minority groups.

After launching a successful strike protesting wage cuts for workers in Oxnard's sugar beet fields, the JMLA sought membership in the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The AFL was the nation's largest union: J. M. Lizarras, the Mexican secretary of the JMLA, petitioned the AFL for a charter, which AFL President Samuel Gompers said he would grant with one stipulation: The Mexican union members must drop the Japanese laborers from their ranks. It was a dictate that reflected the pervasive prejudice against Asians during this period in U.S. history.

The Mexican branch of the JMLA refused to consent to Gompers' demand. In a letter rejecting the charter, Lizarras eloquently described the kinship that bound the workers together.

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 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 charter, except one which will wipe out race prejudices and recognize our fellow workers as being as good as ourselves. ...

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