It's Complicated: Cross Purpose Politics and Reassessing Community in New Deal Era Whittier

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The complex intersection of economic, political, social, and cultural change during the New Deal era offers abundant avenues of historical inquiry that historians have been eager to pursue. However, the same complexity that makes studying this period of dramatic and multi-faceted change fascinating and important has resulted in scholarship that tends to narrowly focus on big questions and big ideas. Did the New Deal save capitalism or devastate it? Were the roots of modern American conservatism planted in Californian workers' confrontation with capital during the 1930s? How did anxieties about Soviet Communism shape modern conservatism? These topics merit attention but risk conveying a reductive impression of the 1930s, in which Americans aligned with liberalism or conservatism based on inherent pro-Communist or pro-capitalist loyalties and connect internationalism to liberalism. This approach overlooks the perspective of social groups witnessing the central debate. Conflicts between striking workers and factory owners are certainly integral to understanding labor history, but what about the teachers, shopkeepers, preachers, or students who also hold stakes in a community, yet aren't direct participants in a confrontation? These histories tell us much about the voices shouting from the pulpits, but less about the people leaning forward to hear the message. Neglecting these indirect historical actors presumes they exerted no influence over the central actors, although there is evidence that their opinions were important – otherwise, why would capital demonize labor organizers as 'Un-American'?

This study will depart from the tendency of New Deal historians to focus on singular questions and big ideas. Using the community of Whittier, California as a case study, this article loosely examines how political ideology can be an outcome of how a community perceives and resolves its problems, not the

cause. Focusing on a narrow geography allows room to consider the complexities of political discourse across multiple community issues.

Politically, the 1930s were deeply fractious. Conservatives feared that the New Deal was turning the United States into a socialist state and saw this transition as a milestone in a conversion to a "communistic" state. Conservatives were appalled that George Creel, California's labor secretary chastised growers for abusive labor practices, and thought government support for workers was a symptom of sympathy for socialism. They might not be "red," but they were certainly "pink." "Pink" was a moniker applied to people that were considered "soft on Communism."[1] Growers also confronted public opinion that had been sensitive to labor concerns. After the Central Valley Strike of 1933, they worked to portray striking workers as anti-American revolutionaries. Conservatives linked themselves to their view of traditional Americanism. Franklin D. Roosevelt's supporters, on the other hand, embraced his New Deal for the "Forgotten Man" and sought to apply the protections promised to non-agricultural workers to farm and orchard workers. They sought to reform America in ways that would make it more equitable for all Americans. Both sides viewed each other as endemic to their interests, because they equated them with the national good.[2]

Political ideology did not sort Whittier into orderly social factions and alliances; there was fluidity depending on the issues and interests at play. This article will demonstrate that community anxieties about economic health and world peace were greater influences on community attitudes than political ideology. During the 1936 Whittier Citrus strike, business leaders leveraged racial segregation, Whittier's economic anxieties, and stereotypes of communist labor agitators to inhibit community support for striking workers. Neglecting the non-historical actors might

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[1] Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Right Out of California: The 1930s and the Big Business Roots of Modern Conservatism* (New York: The New Press, 2015), the right used this label to discredit individuals they felt were a threat to their interpretation of what America should be.

[2] Olmsted, *Right Out of California* and Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

prompt a conclusion that this "standard" conservative reaction could show that Whittier was ideologically right-wing in 1936. However, the narrative is complicated by Whittier's other prominent concern during 1936 – the rise of fascism and spectre of international conflict. Although peace was not an exclusively liberal concern - conservatives were deeply non-interventionist during the 1930s – Whittier celebrated the National Student Strike for Peace, an event sponsored by the American Student Union (ASU). The ASU was directly associated with the Communist Party of the United States. It enriches our understanding of this complex period to recognize that Whittier was willing to rub shoulders with both the right and the left when their interests overlapped. Understanding the complexities of how people engaged with ideas during this pivotal period of fractious politics can help us deconstruct and defuse twenty-first century tension with insights and solutions that transcend divisive ideological breaches in society.

The City of Whittier

Quakers established the city of Whittier twelve miles east of Los Angeles in 1885. By the 1930s it numbered 15,000 residents representing a diversity of Protestant faiths by the 1930s. Whittier's principal industry was walnut and citrus farming in the land adjacent to the town's formal boundaries.[3] The Leffingwell Ranch and Murphy Ranch were the dominant ranches, although many Whittier business owners supplemented their earnings with small citrus ranches. The Whittier Citrus Association and East Whittier Citrus Association were important co-operatives where

[3] "A Brief History of Whittier to 1970," Whittier Community Development, City of Whittier, accessed October 31, 2021, https://www.cityofwhittier.org/government/community-development/planning-services/historic-preservation/a-brief-history-of-whittier-to-1970.

mainly Mexican and Mexican American workers packed fruit for Sunkist to distribute nationally.



Figure I: Whittier Citrus Association, early twentieth century

Mexican and Mexican American workers lived in housing on the ranches or in the *colonia* of Jimtown at Whittier's Western boundary.[4] Jimtown originated in 1848, thirty-seven years before the Quakers arrived, as a village where Native American workers at Pio Pico's ranch lived. Dependent upon these workers and citrus ranchers were the white, protestant business owners and boosters of "Uptown Whittier," and the educators of Whittier High School and Whittier College. Established only two years after the town was founded and drawing students from as far as Hawaii, Whitter College, reflected Quaker ideals and catered to a spectrum of interests from gardening and international events to the Townsend retirement income plan through its many social and cultural clubs.

Mexican and Mexican American Workers

Mexican and Mexican American workers of Whittier are the hardest voices to find in the historical record and bringing their stories out of Whittier's shadows relies on the memory and perception of the surrounding community. Laborers on Whittier citrus ranches lived and worked in their home community; they did not migrate to follow harvests like workers in the lettuce or cotton fields. Housing arrangements on the ranches offer insight into the social geography of 1930s Whittier. At Leffingwell Ranch, married white men enjoyed a free-standing cabin, contrasted with Mexican families who lived in apartment-style units that were physically distanced from white families, behind the ranch's packing house. White ranch workers seldom interacted with non-white workers socially. One oral history subject quickly recalled names of several whites he had worked with and what

[4] Whittier Citrus Association, early 20th century. Whittier Public Library Historical Photograph Collection. Accessed 22 March 2022. https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/kt8p3028cb/

churches they went to but could not remember the names of any Mexican or Mexican American co-workers and assumed they were "probably all Catholic."[5] Another interviewee recalled a "distinct line between those people and the people of Whittier" and did not remember seeing Latinx people in town. His word choice suggests that he did not consider Mexican or Mexican American workers to be part of the Whittier community.[6]

Mexican and Mexican American workers who did not live on the ranches resided in Jimtown.[7] Jimtown residents claimed it to be the oldest existing Mexican settlement in the Los Angeles area. It grew into a village of two-and three-room structures, residents remembered in the 1930s, around a store owned by Jim Harvey, the source of its name. Built on the edge of the river locals called *"El Oje"* (the Hole), it was prone to flooding in winter storms and the streets ran with mud. In addition to seasonal flooding, many of the frail homes were knocked down or damaged by the 1933 earthquake. Nevertheless, residents fondly remembered a strong sense of community in Jimtown. They also recalled the community's strong sense of patriotism. During World War II houses throughout the *colonia* proudly displayed flags honoring family members in military service.[8] These strong community memories contrast with the memories of students at Whittier High School, being schooled only three miles away. They recalled the existence of Jimtown but remembered no Latinx students except "only five or six of the real ambitious ones." These

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[5] Herman Brannon and Agnes Smith Brannon, interview by Mitch Haddad, April 15, 1970, OH 0818, transcript, Richard Nixon Oral History Project, Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton, Fullerton, California. All interviews cited here come from the Richard Nixon Oral History Project. In fact, Mexican residents defied the stereotype of Latinx Catholicism. There were both evangelical Christians and Quakers among them.

[6] Albert Haendiges, interviewed by John Donnelly, April 8, 1970, OH 0871, transcript.

[7] Jimtown was not a formal name and some sources put this name in quotation marks due to its informal nature, which delegitimizes the community. The people who lived there remember it as Jimtown and call themselves Jimtowners, so this article will not question the legitimacy of the name.

[8] Lynn Simross, "Digging Up Roots of an Early Mexican Barrio: Former Residents of Jimtown gather For First Reunion," *Los Angeles Times,* October 29, 1984.

interviewees expressed the view that Mexican and Mexican Americans did not prioritize school and shared the view, common at the time, that Latinx people had no interest in education.[9] There may not have been legally enforced segregation, but a clear pattern of segregation in practice between whites and non-whites begins to emerge.

Contemporary newspaper accounts described Jimtown in terms that further distanced the community from the rest of Whittier, whites, and America.[10] An article about trash dumping described it as a "Mexican settlement just west of Whittier." Instead of condemning people who dumped their trash in Jimtown or calling for anti-dumping laws to be enforced, the L.A. County Health Department asked for a public dump to be created for the convenience of people dumping their trash.[11] Instead of interviewing Jimtown residents about events in their community, newspapers asked L.A. County or Whittier officials about them. Newspapers portrayed "picturesque North Whittier Mexican Colony" as if it was a foreign outpost, not a Whittier neighborhood.[12]

Aside from the "distinct line between those people and the people of Whittier," racial stereotypes of the period shored up white perceptions that the Latinx were not just culturally different, but racially different. For example, during the 1920s employers had developed a "preference for Mexican labor through a series of economic and racial arguments" that Mexicans were "docile…

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[9] Albert Haendiges, interview. Barbara Mashburn, interview, June 7, 1970, OH 0901. Douglas Brannon, interview, April 14, 1970. For more on Anglo views of Latinx people in the 1930s, see Stephen Lewthwaite, "Race, Paternalism and California Pastoral," *Agricultural History,* Winter 2007, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Winter, 2007), pp. 1-35.

[10] This was not unique to Whittier. See Gilbert Gonzalez, *Labor and Community: Mexican Citrus Worker Villages in a Southern California County, 1900-1950.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994. And Matt Garcia, *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970,* University of North Carolina press, 2001.

[11] "Trash Dump in Jimtown Presents Problem to Health Authorities," *Los Angeles Times,* March 30, 1937.

[12] "Church and Three Homes Burn in Mexican Colony," *Los Angeles Times,* January 25, 1935.

tractable…perfectly suited to stoop labor."[13] Mexicans were thought to lack ambition beyond money enough to fill their bellies each day.[14] Whittierites who had internalized these stereotypes, like the former student who thought only very few of the "real ambitious ones" were interested in education, may have found grower assertions that strikers just wanted relief plausible. [15]

The Los Angeles Director of Public Health established separate health clinics for Mexicans and whites because he believed healthcare services for the two should not be mixed. He claimed Mexicans were prone to nomadic living, overcrowding, uncleanliness and posed a health hazard to whites. The Los Angeles County Department of Health opened a clinic to serve the Mexican and Mexican American residents of Jimtown in 1927 to answer the "public demand for the separate treatment of certain diseases which are infectious and prevalent among these people."[16] This created another barrier to interaction between Latinx and non-Latinx residents.

Although not formalized through law, structural segregation kept Mexican Americans at arm's length from the broader community.[17] While some white Whittierites reported "racial discrimination of the worst sort," many of them had "less knowledge about minority problems." There were Whittierites who were oblivious to this structural segregation, and there were gatekeepers who managed it. In 1936, this systemic racism would serve Growers well as they spun a narrative that demonized striking workers as peons of anti-American radicals.

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[13] Stephanie Lewthwaite, "Race, Paternalism, and 'California Pastoral': Rural Rehabilitation and Mexican Labor in Greater Los Angeles," *Agricultural History,* Winter, 2007, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Winter, 2007), pp 1-35.
[14] Lewthwaite, "Race, Paternalism, and 'California Pastoral'," pp. 1-35.
[15] Albert Haendiges, interview.
[16] Emily K. Abel, "Only the Best Class of Immigrants: Public Health Policy Toward Mexicans and Filipinos in Los Angeles, 1910-1940," *Public Health Then and Now: American Journal of Public Health,* Vol. 94, No. 6, June 2004, pp. 932 – 939.
[17] Merle West, interview, 0981-F01, transcript.

Whittier Commerce and The New Deal

Whittier was thriving when the Great Depression befell the nation. At the time, Uptown Whittier's Central Business District was home to many prosperous businesses serving white residents who lived and worked in the area. This segment of the community included bankers, retailers, grocers, faculty, staff, and students at Whittier College, citrus ranchers, and owners of service companies that tended specialized needs for the citrus industry (such as pest control companies). Although Whittier retained a strong Quaker identity in the thirties, Episcopalians, and other Protestant denominations now shared prominence in the still deeply religious town. If non-Christians were present, they were mostly invisible to the recorded memories of the people available for scholarship.

Politically conservative in the 1930s, Whittier viewed its interests better reflected in Herbert Hoover's political philosophies than Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Hoover, a Quaker, argued that American individualism empowered people to pull themselves out of economic stress and that government relief might create dependency on the state for support. Roosevelt countered this argument by insisting that the American system had created inequities that needed to be redressed by a "New Deal" that helped Americans back on their feet.[18] Whittier felt the pain of the Depression, but the impact was cushioned because national demand for Whittier's citrus crop remained strong. "Whittier felt the Depression perhaps less than some areas" because the "work was the kind of work that went on whether there was a depression or not," one Whittierite recalled.[19] Whittier's strong agricultural helped sustain the economy. Businesses hung on – sometimes by a thread, but they hung on.

Hoover's opposition to using government spending to push the U.S economy out of the Depression resonated with Whittierites, but this did not mean they took a wholly negative view of Franklin Roosevelt. "Much as I didn't like Roosevelt, he

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[18] Christopher Empett, "Presidential Manhood: Roosevelt, Hoover and Gendered Language in the 1932 Election," *Perspectives: A Journal of Historical Inquiry,* Volume 47, Spring 2020, pp 31-50.

[19] Herman Brannon and Agnes Smith Brannon, interview.

did get things moving," one Whittierite allowed, although he was critical of the large national debt the New Deal created.[20] Another resident credited the NRA policy for scaling the work week down from forty to thirty-two hours, getting him a job and felt obligated to thank FDR by voting for him.[21] Business owners who disliked the "socialistic" New Deal sometimes felt compelled to apply for aid nonetheless because their economic need overrode their principled opposition.[22]



Figure II: Bailey Post Office. Whittier Public Library Historical Photograph Collection, Creator: Barton's Studio, Whittier, CA

Echoing Herbert Hoover's own concerns that relief would undermine the spirit of American individualism and self-improvement, Whittierites complained that "…Roosevelt said to the poor people – now don't worry, you just sit there, and we'll bring it to you."[23] Relief programs were viewed as having a "…lot of political appeal…particularly to the poorer classes of people." One interviewee was so incensed by the New Deal program that he "…got to the place where I couldn't be rational about Mr. Roosevelt."[24] Others viewed the New Deal as Franklin Roosevelt's opportunistic effort to amass and centralize power unto himself.[25] While the city maintained clearly demarcated

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[20] Merle West, interview.
[21] William Soberg, interview, April 29, 1970, OH 0954, transcript.
[22] Grant Garman appealed for relief through the National Recovery Act because he was "enjoying the attempt to run a restaurant when nobody had money to buy any food." Grant M. Garman, interview, June 1, 1970, OH 0859, transcript.
[22] Merle West, interview.
[23] Harry A. Schuyler, interview, Jan 31, 1976.
[24] Wallace Black, interview, July 6, 1970.
[25] Lyle Otterman, interview, June 5, 1970, OH 0903, transcript.

social boundaries between whites and non-whites, it held a complex, oppositional and nuanced disposition toward the New Deal that included taking advantage of its fruits.[26]

Blaming Radical Agitators for the 1936 Citrus Strike

Violent confrontations between capital and labor were endemic in California during the Depression. Thirty-six percent of America's large-scale farms were in California and the migration of workers into the Golden State created a labor surplus for growers, allowing them to suppress wages. The New Deal protected union organizing but agricultural workers were explicitly excluded from such protection. Owners kept workers subservient with vigilantes and company stores that rendered primarily migrant labor groups dependent upon them. Communist organizers came to assist California strikers because organizations like the American Federation of Labor would not. The Central Valley Cotton Strike of 1933 shocked landowners when the federal government supported migrant workers instead of sending in troops to put workers in their place. By the time Imperial Valley workers went on strike in 1934, owners were prepared to retaliate. They attacked workers by co-opting local governments and police forces while propagandizing striking workers as pawns of foreign radicals to discourage public support.[27]

Interestingly, labor coverage in Whittier's newspaper was, if not pro-labor, at least politically neutral when discussing worker issues that did not have an overt connection to the local economy. In 1936, the *Whittier News* printed light-hearted pictures of female retail workers pitching tents in the sporting goods section of French department stores for a sit-in.[28] When the strike was resolved, the *News* commended the French government's reforms that limited the work week to forty hours, allowed for paid vacations, and legitimized collective bargaining. The newspaper praised the strike because it was "against industry,

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[26] Some Whittierites argued that they might as well take advantage of the New Deal since those programs were going to be paid from their taxes anyway. Lyle Otterman, interview.

[27] Olmsted, *Right Out of California*,17-18.

[28] "Storing Up Energy For Strike," *Whittier News,* June 22, 1936.

not against capitalism." The newspaper further argued that the U.S. Federal Government should be "poised to intervene in labor disputes" because Russia, Italy, and Germany "…can testify that failure to solve this problem leads to the most disastrous kind of trouble."[29]

Even U.S. strikers in other industries received neutral treatment. When San Pedro dockworkers complained that management was hiring strikebreakers and called a meeting to "obtain pledges of support from other unions in Southern California," the *Whittier News* reported the fact matter-of-factly and did not editorialize concerns about radicals or foreign agitators.[30] Labor disputes in the world beyond Whittier were treated as topics of intellectual interest. However, when a strike threatened the city's own economic interests, the gloves came off and journalists armed themselves with demonizing rhetoric designed to cast strike organizers as villains who were against capitalism. The *Whittier News* parroted the narrative growers scripted, claiming radical agitators were instigating strikes and workers were dupes or pawns of nefarious anti-American operative.[31]

Coverage began quietly; on June 15, strikers met in Jimtown where "…the meeting was orderly, and the discussions only concerned steps to be taken in securing their demands."[32] This diminutive article was buried on page four, nestled between a bulletin about a Chicken Dinner at First Christian Church and a dance recital. It offered no details of the discussions, worker demands, or the identity of the people certifying the meeting's "orderly" nature. It was also the most positive coverage the Whittier strikers would receive.

The *Whittier News* never interviewed strike leaders or workers to ask their objectives, instead relying on a "special

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[29] "French Strike Action is a Lesson to U.S.," *Whittier News,* June 30, 1936.
[30] "San Pedro May Be 'Open Port,'" *Whittier News,* November 2, 1936.
[31] For thorough reviews of those strikes, see Olmsted, *Right Out of California* and Starr, *Endangered Dreams*.
[32] "Strikers Meet," *Whittier News,* June 15, 1936.

deputy sheriff's report."[33] On Saturday, June 20th, 1936, the newspaper warned "…radical union agitators and Mexican workers on WPA will attempt to force a walkout."[34] Citrus growers refused to recognize citrus unions because "what little remained of the old time Mexican field workers confederation has been completely taken over by Lillian Monroe and Pat Callahan, radical agitators of long record, and their sole strength has been from the ranks of the WPA and other Government supported workers."[35]

Linking strikers to the Works Progress Administration was a second way of denigrating them by claiming they did not want to work and were lazy people that preferred government relief to honest toil. As reiterated by the *Whittier News* to the community, local growers argued that WPA relief beneficiaries wanted to create strife so the government would continue to provide relief. This rhetoric connected striking workers to white Whittierite suspicions about the collectivist aspirations of the New Deal by repeatedly claiming that the strike drew its strength from "the WPA and other government supported workers" who rejected American principles of work and self-reliance. Workers were portrayed as not only lazy or un-American, but as part of a campaign to negatively distort the country's identity. Because of *de facto* racial segregation, white Whittierites did not question or challenge these narratives about their "foreign" neighbors.

Packing house managers promised to address concerns brought to them by workers, but only if they stayed at their posts. They also discredited strikers and organizers who advocated worker interests. They characterized one who stayed at his post as reliable workers who needed protection from the "radical" that wanted to deny his right to earn a wage. "Several special sheriff radio cars are patrolling the Whittier district" to "ensure protection

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[33] "Pickers' Terms Revealed," *Whittier News,* June 17, 1936. An unknown reporter had located a report at the local sheriff's outpost explaining that workers wanted their wages raised from $3.00 to $4.00 per nine-hour day.
[34] "Local Strike Slated for Monday," *Whittier News,* June 20, 1936.
[35] "Local Strike" *Whittier News.*

for those that returned to work."[36] On June 23, growers complained that "the real obstacle" to ending the strike was "…the fear instilled by threats from the organizers of the movement. Many strikers, it has been claimed, are willing to return to work and would resume labor if they were positive no harm would befall them" from strike organizers. Workers who were "intimidated" into striking returned to their jobs as soon as police cars showed up to protect them.[37] Management promised workers protection as they portrayed participants in organized strikes as lazy, weak, or anti-American.

When the government sided with the strikers' interests during the Central Valley Strike of 1933, agribusiness believed the New Deal government had turned on them, and they were furious about it. However, local growers also felt favorable public opinion was important so they could resolve labor disputes on their terms. During the Imperial Valley strike they framed the strike as an attack on the community itself and in 1936 Whittier growers used this useful strategy to rebuke worker demands.[38]

On the first day of the strike, growers reported one-third of their pickers did not report for work. They told journalists that the strike was being manipulated by the same group that had orchestrated the Central Valley and Imperial Valley strikes.[39] It was true that organizers like Pat Chambers and Caroline Decker had gone to various locations to help workers organize, it was also true that the Communist Party had played a role in deploying activists like Dorothy Ray to help workers, but these efforts responded to worker needs. Industrial labor organizations would not help them, and the New Deal explicitly denied agricultural workers protections that other workers enjoyed. It was not an orchestrated plot to foment a labor insurrection, but a pragmatic strategy to help workers win incremental improvements in working conditions.[40]

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[36] "One Third of Local Pickers Quit," *Whittier News,* June 22, 1936. The article spelled it 'insure.'
[37] "Labor Unrest is Improved," *Whittier News,* June 23, 1936.
[38] Olmsted, *Right Out of California,* 125.
[39] "One Third," *Whittier News.*
[40] Starr, *Endangered Dreams,* 61-83.

Not only were fruit pickers charged with being duped by radicals, but growers trotted out stereotypical tropes that Mexicans were lazy. The public was reminded that "radicals are reported to have joined the WPA force in promoting a general strike because Works Progress Administration laborers cannot be used as strike-breakers, and it is reported that they have encouraged the strike to enable them to continue on relief." The newspaper went on to report: "There are almost 7000 Mexican families on relief…It has been difficult to secure labor owing to relief without work."[41] This coverage misrepresented the WPA – which created jobs, not direct relief and includes the causal fallacy that there was a relationship between the number of Mexican families on relief, the WPA, and the strike. A striking worker allegedly stabbed a citrus picker who continued working during the strike in the solitary act of strike related violence the newspaper recorded.[42] By July 11, the strike was over. Trucks carried pickers from location to location under armed escort and fifty extra sheriffs patrolled Jimtown and was branded as the place where Strikers lived.[43]

The Whittier newspaper coverage reveals much about the strike from the perspective of the newspaper and its readership. None of the workers were interviewed, and neither were any of the organizers or any spokesperson. Beyond invoking the names Lillian Monroe and Pat Callahan, the paper never reported the actual presence of the "agitators." The paper reports strike orchestraters transporting truckloads of people into the community to shore up picket lines but does not show pictures or coverage of these alleged comings and goings. That none of these pieces of information made it into the principal local newspaper suggests that as in other California labor disputes, establishment media was supporting a favored local industry and working to garner public support for the industry against the workers.

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[41] "One Third," *Whittier News.*
[42] "Citrus Picker Knifed, Beaten." *Whittier News,* June 24, 1936.
[43] "Vigilantes Battle Citrus Strikers in War Against Reds - Two Meeting Places Smashed Up; Roving Carloads of ex-Workers Hunted by Authorities." *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1936.

How can we infer that white Whittierites accepted this narrative? Firstly, the Mexican American community was fully segregated from the white Whittier community. Geographically, the boundaries of Jimtown separated the Latinx and white populaces of the city. Even permanent housing on the ranches upheld racial barriers. Except in rare instances, whites did not intermix with Latinx people at schools or on the commercial districts. Unless someone worked on a citrus ranch, there was small likelihood they would get to know a person that was not a white protestant. In fact, MFK Fisher, a white Catholic and daughter of the newspaper publisher, argued that discrimination also applied to white Catholics. She said that she was never invited inside a Quaker home because "Irish women were cooks and all Irish men were cops."[44]

Another re-occurring theme in strike news coverage supports this claim: Ongoing reassurances that the harvest and sale of citrus would not be impacted by the strike. Packing house managers promised they would immediately fill positions vacated by strikers, and a large print advertisement was placed in the *News* promoting the industry's success and economic contributions to Whittier.[45] Growers indicated that Orange County fruit producers had maintained productivity during their own contest with striking workers by hiring high school students to pick up the slack and promised that Whittier orchards "...were not suffering [from the strike] because of the availability of college and high school students..." who could do the work.[46] Many whites in the area were barely making ends meet or afford college during the Depression, and they were willing to replace striking workers.[47] White Whittierites had a shared economic interest in the health of

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[44] MFK Fisher, *Among Friends,* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983). Catholic MFK Fisher remembered anti-Catholic prejudice in the town and claimed never to have been invited into a Quaker home. Former Whittier College President Paul Smith argued she was misinterpreting Whittier's stratified social hierarchy.

[45] "Local Citrus Strike Slated for Monday," *Whittier News,* June 20, 1936.

[46] "One Third of Local Citrus Pickers Quit," *Whittier News,* June 22, 1936, and "Citrus Picker Knifed, Beaten," *Whittier News,* June 24, 1936.

the citrus industry that aligned them with the growers with whom they shared church pews and civic festivals.

Exploring the Whittier Citrus Strike of 1936 portrays a segregated community that functioned in the historiographical binaries of racial antagonisms and class conflict. Economic self-interest and segregation between the white and Latinx residents empowered the propagandic narrative growers shared. They successfully leveraged right wing ideology and the segregated community to defend their economic interests. The use of racialized stereotypes and demonization of labor make this event quite recognizable as a political moment of labor versus capital. However, this singular moment in Whittier history does not define its civic political positioning during the New Deal Era. A few months earlier, another headline-snagging event spotlighted a different diverse constituency within the city.

High School and College Life in Whittier

Whittier High School [WHS] and Whittier College students were nostalgic about their time at these two institutions during the 1930s. Many white students remembered very few non-whites in the school and surveying the surnames of the senior class supports their memory. This census is based on surnames in the senior class of each surveyed year.[48]

Table 1 Senior Class Surname Analysis of WHS yearbooks 1933, 1934, 1935

Senior Class Year	**1933**	**1934**	**1935**
European surnames	221	244	255
Hispanic surnames	4	2	5
Japanese surnames	5	5	4
Chinese surnames	1	1	2

[48] *Cardinal and White 1933, Volume XXIII,* Edited and Published by the Student Body, Whittier Union High School, Whittier, 1933 *Cardinal and White, Volume XXIV,* Edited and Published by the Student Body, Whittier Union High School, Whittier, 1934, *Cardinal and White 1935, Volume XXV,* Edited and Published by the Student Body, Whittier Union High School, 1935.

Most students were children of Whittier business owners, or people employed by those businesses. During this period, white businesspeople, academic faculty, and college students were surviving economically by the skin of their teeth.[49] Students remembered it as a time of the community "pulling together: but also remembered WHS as being "very clannish" with "cliques" where it was hard for kids from "outside" to be accepted socially. This applied not only to people of color, but also white students that were not related to the city's tightknit, upper-class social circles. Students remembered class consciousness far more than race. Not all students held the Latinx community to be invisible and some who lived near Mexican or Mexican American families had numerous Latinx friends outside of school.[50] Research did not determine what differentiated the students who reported having Mexican or Mexican American friends from ones that did not remember associating with them at all.[51]

Gleaning insight into the economic circumstances of these students is problematic because of the narrow focus of the community being studied, but a 1936 study analyzing homework practices at WHS offers some clues. Students were surveyed about where they completed homework. 34.7% of the respondents said they had a private room, 31.9% said they at least had their own desk and 69% said their workspace was well lit. Only half of one percent complained that their workspace was poorly lit. This, coupled with the testimonies that identified the typical student as a child of a businessperson or owner, suggest that students were at least somewhat financially secure.[52] Students estimate that between a quarter and half of Whittier High School students went on to college.[53]

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[49] Mildred Beard, interview, December 6, 1971, OH 0898, transcript.
[50] Arlene Randall, interview, June 30, 1970, OH 0935, transcript.
[51] For example, were the less economically advantaged white students more likely to live close to Jim Town? A little disturbingly, one interviewer in the 1970 Oral History Project asked a former WHS student "did they have any trouble with them?" referring to the Mexican American students.
[52] Louis Thomas Jones, "An Analysis of the Problem of Home Study at Whittier Union High School," Thesis, USC School of Education, 1936, pp. 65.
[53] C. Richard Harris, interview, March 5, 1970, OH 0874, transcript.

Whittier College, as culturally conservative as the town, was struggling financially during the 1930s. Faculty were underpaid, and some were given small plots of land on the campus property in lieu of wages. The school had less than five hundred students and operated on a stringent budget but still tried to aid students struggling with the $250.00 tuition.[54] The Depression forced the school to discontinue its sports programs, including the very popular baseball program. Students felt a sense of camaraderie because all "were in the same boat" financially– although not a boat they perceived to share with Jimtown residents. Most students worked, some mowing lawns while others worked in the orchards "smudging" during cold spells.[55] One student worked in a gas station seven hours each night, paid for meals on campus by doing dishes and paid for a room by taking care of the homeowner's yard.[56] The Whittier State School for Boys, a reform home, was a major employer in the community and offered college boys a modest wage and a place to sleep. Students were compelled to scrimp and save, including prowling the avocado groves at night and stealing fruit for their breakfast. Students bought books used and often shared them among two or three students. Unlike Whittier High School, Whittier College drew many students from the city of Los Angeles and other nearby communities, including exchange students from the Quaker college in Hawaii.[57]

There was a Cosmopolitan Club for international students. Setsuko Tani remembers there were African American, Hawaiian, Japanese, and white American students (children of missionary families) who had been born overseas. She felt there was "no such thing as prejudice" on campus.[58] A white student framed the situation differently, saying that students and white Whittierites "…had less knowledge about minority problems."[59]

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[54] Joanne Brown Dale, interview, Date: Unknown, OH 0843, transcript.
[55] "Smudging" heated citrus crops and protected them from frost. Workers tended the oil burning "smudge pots."
[56] Merle Mashburn, interview, June 2, 1970.
[57] Charles Kendle, interview, April 17, 1970.
[58] Setsuko Tani, interview, January 1, 1971, OH 0964, transcript.
[59] Merle West, interview.

As in Whittier High School, and even though Whittier College students did not consider their college was a "rich man's school," students were still aware of class consciousness within their community strata. This could function in unexpected ways. Banker's son Hubert Perry needed to work to pay his way through college but was criticized for taking a job from someone who really needed it because his peers assumed his family was more financially secure than they truly were. Female college students also struggled to secure work because employers felt that by giving a woman work, they were "putting a man out of work."[60]

By 1936, growing militarism worldwide raised world peace as an issue that impacted student anxieties about the future. Visiting speakers included anti-imperialist evangelical minister Kirby Page, a critic of nationalism who argued that "capitalism and individualism…is irreconcilable with the religion of Jesus."[61] Sinclair Lewis, who penned the cautionary *It Can't Happen Here,* reflected this growing unease, and the presence of liberal, even leftist voices, in the campus discourse.[62] These voices complicate political portrayals of Whittier that begin and end with its cultural and political conservatism.

Whittier, Pacifism, and the Student Strike for Peace

On April 3, 1936, Rev. J.K. Stewart, of the Beverly Vista Community Church of Beverly Hills, came to speak before the Men's League of the Friend's Church in Whittier. He warned that the economic privations of the Depression were less dangerous to the country than "The Menace of Propaganda." This propaganda was being used as it had been in World War I. Stewart worried that the interventionalist Roosevelt administration had tripled military spending unnecessarily, "we have friends to the north, friends to the south" – and was using this propaganda to garner popular support for intervention in a potential European conflict.[63]

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[60] Hubert Perry, interview, 1970, OH 0929, transcript.
[61] Kirby Page, *Individualism and Socialism: An Ethical Survey of Economic and Political Forces,* Ferris Printing Company, 1933.
[62] Newt Robinson, interview.
[63] "Propaganda's Menace Told Friends Club: Rev. Stewart Pleads for Clear Sight in Address to Men," *Whittier News,* April 3, 1936.

The following day an editorial warned that a war was coming "And we must stay out of it!" It also pointed out that the money being spent on war material could provide every American a car and a year of gas.[64]

Peace and non-interventionism were ongoing concerns in Whittier's discourse during the 1930s. Advocates objected to war in all its contexts and were more consistent with the left and anti-imperialists, whereas non-interventionists objected to the United States involving itself in wars that were not in the interests of the American people. Non-interventionists tended to be Republican. In Whittier, the peace movement culminated with Whittier College's participation in the Third Annual National Student Strike for Peace.[65]

Anti-war activism was not anomalous to right-wing politics during the 1930s. Republicans were staunchly isolationists, so it is no surprise that conservative Whittier would host a significant peace rally, which was also consistent with Whittier's pacifist Quaker heritage. However, the American Student Union (ASU), national sponsors of the event, had ties to the Communist Party which established the National Student League during the early 1930s when the party began recruiting students as well as industrial workers to its ranks. The National Student League co-founded the American Student Union, which

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[64] "How Much Wiser it is to Spend for Peace," *Whittier News,* April 14, 1936.

[65] Whittier social clubs frequently featured discussions about endangered peace. Whittier College's Oratorian club hosted a public a debate where speakers took the position of England, Italy, Russia, Japan, Germany and France to argue out their perspectives. "Viewpoints of Five Nations Given by Oratonians," *Whittier News,* April 6, 1936. Another speaker asked voters to urge elected officials to abandon tariffs against Japan because the economic pressure imposed by those tariffs could provoke Japan to seek military redress against the United States. The article does not reveal if the speaker discussed the reason for the tariffs, or Japanese military activity in Manchuria. "Drop Tariffs for Peace, is Libby's Idea," *Whittier News,* April 16, 1936. The executive secretary of the National Council for Prevention of War spoke at the First Methodist Church on how the public could support policies, such as neutrality, and apply pressure on the government to enact them. "FJ Libby is to Speak Here: Prevention of War His Subject Tomorrow," *Whittier News,* April 14, 1936.

organized the national strike Whittier was so enthusiastic about, the city was celebrating an event instigated by "radicals."[66]

Over 300,000 students were expected to take part nationally, compared with 175,000 the prior year. Students would give speeches promoting peace and critiquing war. Round tables would be convened to discuss such topics as '"The Peace Program in the School,' 'Chemistry and the Next War,' and 'Economic Problems Caused by the Last War.'" Joseph P. Lash, of the openly leftist (ASU), said: "The strike was a dress rehearsal of what the younger intends to do if American imperialism plunges the nation into another war."[67]

The radical agitators of the citrus strike were invisible; Whittier College, both students and administrators, were happy to partner with an organization and share the stage with the radical left when they agreed on a crisis facing the world. Whittier College President W.O. Mendenhall told reporters: "We of Whittier College are very happy to join forces with the leading colleges and universities of America in creating a national sentiment against war, the destroyer of civilization." Students and faculty were proud that they had built more than a simple protest – they had built a robust event that confronted an "onrush of jingo propaganda in Washington…[after the] passage of the unprecedented military budget."[68]

Jerry Voorhis founded a progressive school for disadvantaged boys in nearby San Dimas, he was remembered as a good person with questionable ideals. Although he was "a good [Congressional] representative who would go to bat whether you were a Democrat or Republican," Whittier voters complained that despite his human decency "He was way out left…and certainly a 'New Dealer.'"[69] During the 1936 Presidential Election, Voorhis

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[66] Patti McGill Peterson, "Student Organizations and The Antiwar Movement in America, 1900-1960," *American Studies,* Vol. 13, No. 1, Peace Movements in America (Spring 1972), pp 131-147.
[67] "College Will Give Program Against War: Public Invited to Hear Authority on Campus Tomorrow," *Whittier News,* April 14, 1936.
[68] "Whittier Endorses Peace in Effective Demonstration," "Students Strike: America Union Sets April 22 Peace Day," "Voorhis Speaks: Hoefer Presents Student Peace Opinion," *Quaker Campus,* April 15, 1936.
[69] Wallace Black, interview.

was denigrated by an advertisement proclaiming: "Socialism, Communism and Fascism are all un-American 'isms.' – Vote for Americanism." It included photostatic copies of letters from the registrar vouching that Voorhis was once a registered member of the Socialist Party.[70] Nevertheless, he was prominently featured as a speaker for the Peace Strike by Whittier College; his socialistic tendencies did not disqualify his merits as an advocate for a shared cause.

Conclusion

So, what was Whittier's political alignment and how ideologically entrenched was it? Whittier cleaved to conservative values and strongly objected to the New Deal on principal. However, Whittierites were not too ideologically entrenched to deny the ways the Era's policies benefited them. Whittier businesspeople who opposed the New Deal grudgingly and appreciatively took government assistance, not because they were hypocrites, but because they needed it. When workers went on strike in 1936, growers invoked a false narrative to discredit the strike and rally support from the opinions that mattered to them– namely, white Whittierites. Pre-existing racial prejudices, socioeconomic stratification, and geographic boundaries that divided the broader Whittier community served their strategy well. The voices of laborers were ignored completely. Reassured that their economic interests were not at risk, white Whittierites let the strike play out without questioning the integrity of dominant narratives.

However, when debates over pacifism and wartime intervention arose, the boundaries shifted. While it is possible that Whittier's conservative community was not cognizant of the American Student Union's relationship to the Communist Party, their common interests overrode concerns of organizational origins or ideologies. Political ideology was less important than the issues, and Whittierites would work with solutions from the right (suppressing worker rights) to defend their economic interests or the left (working with a communist organization)

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[70] "Political advertisement for Fred Hauser for Congress," *Whittier News,* November 2, 1936.

when fighting pacifism. If the issue was important to Whittierites, they would look for solutions with little concern for the source of the help.

Whittier in the 1930s was pragmatic about its concerns and its solutions. Better understanding the nuanced way that Whittier engaged with issues during the New Deal can help deconstruct highly charged and ideologically polarized debates in twenty-first century politics. Therefore, the entrenched principal opposition can be bridged towards a more pragmatic way of solving community problems without being derailed by political discourse.