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# Imperial Valley, California, Farmworkers' Strike of 1934

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# Imperial Valley, California, Farmworkers' Strike of 1934

## Abstract

[Excerpt] In early November 1933, organizers from the Communist-led Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU) returned to the Imperial Valley, where just four years before their first strike among California's agricultural workers had ended in a swift and inglorious defeat. Now they returned to the valley, fresh from their strike victories in the fall fruit harvest campaign, confident that the time was now ripe to bring unionization to the Imperial Valley lettuce fields.

Conditions in the valley in November 1933 certainly appeared more conducive to the CAWIU's success. Wages for lettuce workers were as low as ten cents an hour and working and living conditions, always the worst in the state, had continued to deteriorate. Many of the Mexican and Filipino farmworkers gathering for the winter lettuce harvest were veterans of other CAWIU strikes, eager to once again take on their employers.

## Keywords

labor movement, strike, California, farmworkers

## Disciplines

Labor History | Labor Relations | Unions

## Comments

### Suggested Citation

Bronfenbrenner, K. (1990). *Imperial Valley, California, farmworkers' strike of 1934* [Electronic version]. Retrieved [insert date], from Cornell University, ILR School site: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/553/>

### Required Publisher Statement

© Taylor & Francis. Final version published as: Bronfenbrenner, K. (1990). Imperial Valley, California, farmworkers' strike of 1934. In R. L. Filippelli (Ed.) *Labor conflict in the United States: An encyclopedia* (pp. 257-258). New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

## **Imperial Valley, California, Farmworkers' Strike of 1934**

*Kate Bronfenbrenner*

In early November 1933, organizers from the Communist-led Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU) returned to the Imperial Valley, where just four years before their first strike among California's agricultural workers had ended in a swift and inglorious defeat. Now they returned to the valley, fresh from their strike victories in the fall fruit harvest campaign, confident that the time was now ripe to bring unionization to the Imperial Valley lettuce fields.

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Yet the young CAWIU organizers, Stanley Hancock and Dorothy Ray, sent in to lead the lettuce strike, arrived in the valley, enthusiastic but inexperienced. Carried away by the workers obvious militancy, they neglected the more tedious work of careful strike planning and union building.

Yet even the most seasoned CAWIU organizers might have failed in the face of the intense opposition from Imperial Valley lettuce growers. These growers were dedicated to using whatever force was necessary to break the strike and keep the union out of the valley. They had started their anti-union campaign before CAWIU organizers had even entered the valley. Hoping to thwart CAWIU efforts by developing a company union of their own, they took steps to revive the *Union de Trabajadores del Valle Imperial*, which had briefly surfaced during the 1928 cantaloupe harvest. With the assistance of the Mexican consul, they met with "union" leaders on November 1 to propose a seven-and-a-half-cent wage increase and to offer vague promises of further increases later in the harvest season.

To the growers' dismay, within two weeks lettuce workers staged a one-day strike to protest the failure of some growers to live up to the unwritten agreement. Meanwhile, CAWIU organizers had arrived on the scene, inviting lettuce workers to transform their ineffectual company union into a "fighting union" that would militantly struggle for improvements in wages and working conditions. Workers in the Brawley area responded by organizing a large and influential CAWIU opposition group within the Mexican union. Under pressure from opposition forces, the leaders of the Mexican union met with growers on January 2, warning that unless wages were raised to thirty-five cents an hour, CAWIU sympathizers would capture control of the union. When the growers refused to grant any increase, the Mexican leaders stepped aside and allowed the CAWIU to take over representation of all Mexican farmworkers in the valley.

Eager to capitalize on burgeoning lettuce worker militancy, Hancock and Ray focused all of their energy on planning for a strike to begin on January 8, the peak of the lettuce harvest. Demands were formulated including a thirty-five-cents-an-hour wage, a minimum five-hour workday, free clean drinking water on the job, free transportation to and from work, union recognition, and abolition of the labor contracting system.

Ten thousand strike bulletins printed in English and Spanish were quickly distributed to workers throughout the valley. But in the rush to prepare for the strike, basic organization had been neglected and, in many camps outside of the immediate Brawley area, working strike committees still had not been developed when the strike began on January 8. Still, 3,000 farmworkers responded on the first day of the strike, and another 2,000 went out the next day, shutting down most field operations for close to a week.

Growers and local authorities responded to the strike with a zeal for violence and intimidation unsurpassed in the history of CAWIU's struggles. Local law enforcement officials, most of them growers themselves, made clear that they would not permit any picketing whatsoever to proceed in their territory.

On January 9, local police, sheriffs, highway patrolmen, and American Legionnaires brutally attacked a caravan of several hundred strikers en route to a strike meeting in El Centre. Three days later a large force of officials fired a barrage of tear gas into Azteca Hall in Brawley, where more than a hundred strikers and their families had gathered for a strike meeting. Barring the doors from the outside, authorities forced men, women, and children to desperately scramble through broken windows to escape the gas. The hall was then stripped and vandalized by the vigilantes, who completely destroyed typewriters, duplicating machines, and the strike kitchen.

With all picketing and strike meetings declared unlawful activity, hundreds of strikers were arrested, with bail in some cases set as high as \$1,800. When attorneys from the International Labor Defense came to the area to assist strikers, they too were arrested and harassed by valley authorities. But federal intervention brought little benefit to the CAWIU. Although they were disturbed by the growers' flagrant violations of worker's civil liberties, these officials were even more disturbed by the possibility of a militant Communist presence in the valley. Thus, they did everything within their power to undermine the CAWIU's influence among farmworkers.

Coming off a string of victories in the fall strike campaign, the collapse of the Imperial Valley Strike was an especially bitter loss for the CAWIU. Unable to withstand the combined forces of growers, law enforcement officials, and anti-union reformers, the union had reached an irrevocable turning point. If 1933 had been the heyday of militant agricultural unionism, the collapse of the Imperial Valley Strike in January 1934, foreshadowed a year of successive devastating defeats.

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