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Unusual Crusade: *Que Pasa Aqui?*

■ **Activism:** Spanish-speaking garment workers and their fervent advocate seem an unlikely group to launch the bid to virtually end bilingual education.

By **BETTINA BOXALL**
TIMES STAFF WRITER

This is ground zero of the latest hot-button initiative to confront Californians: a roomful of chattering children ruled by a no-nonsense Episcopal priest on the urine-scented fringe of Los Angeles' skid row.

It is here, in Alice Callaghan's storefront center for garment workers' families, that she and a group of Latino parents launched a rebellion against bilingual education, inspiring software millionaire Ron K. Unz to craft the June ballot proposal that

would all but eliminate such instruction from the state's public schools.

At first blush, Las Familias del Pueblo appears a curious spawning ground for Proposition 227.

Callaghan has ample liberal credentials. She has been arrested for protesting the treatment of farm workers and the deportation of illegal immigrants. She has staged City Hall sit-ins to demand portable toilets for the homeless and holds mail for them at the center.

For years, she says, she never questioned the value of bilingual education: "I just accepted it as a justice issue."

The parents who send their children to the center for after-school care are even less likely rebels against bilingual teaching. They are poor immigrants who remain firmly planted in a Spanish-speaking world years after their arrival in this country, unable to teach their children much English because they have never mastered it themselves—precisely the people bilin-

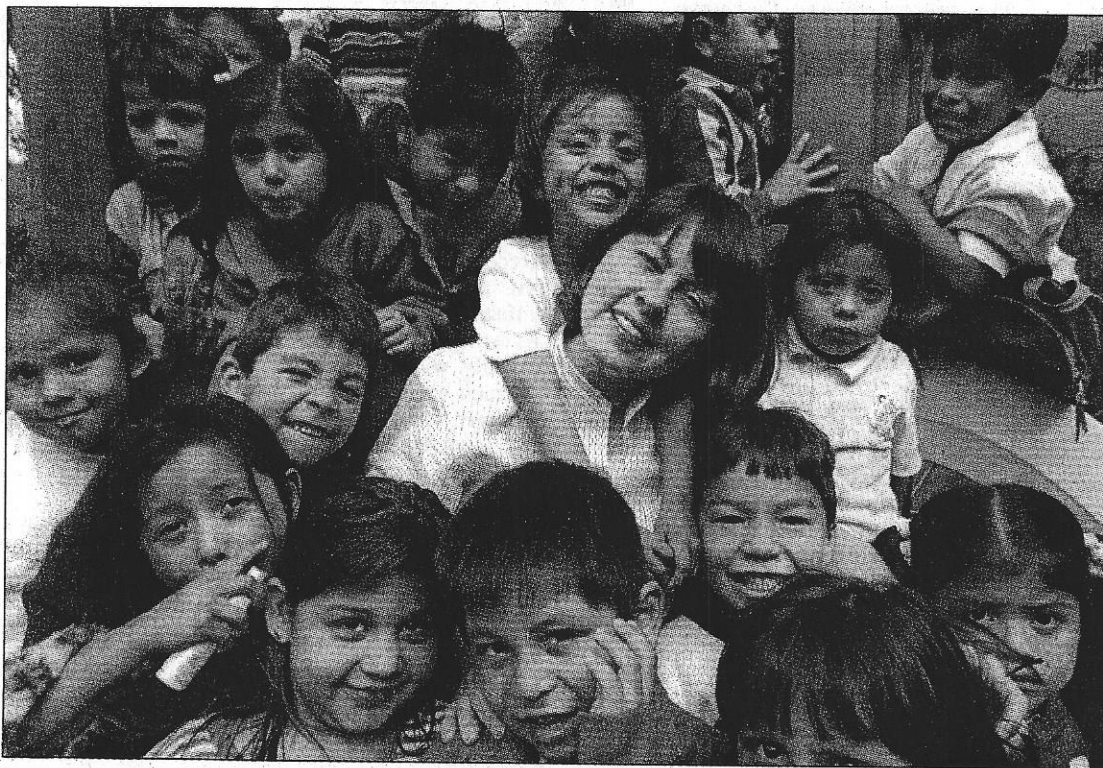
gual education would seem to be designed for.

But Callaghan is not one to toe the party line, liberal or otherwise. As a young woman she was a Goldwater Republican. Then she became a Vietnam War protester. She was a Catholic nun and then became an Episcopal priest.

A media-savvy skid row activist, she shuns coalitions. She operates her small community center—a large aqua room with a fenced off driveway for an outdoor play area—without government money so she can run it as she pleases. A fellow priest with whom she butted heads once described her strength and weakness as one and the same: that she is "strong, unyielding, uncompromising."

"We don't worry about what people think," said Callaghan, who sprinkles her conversations with a vaguely royal "we," never making it clear just who the "we" is. "We don't worry about being politically incor-

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ANACLETO RAPPING / Los Angeles Times

Children surround fiercely independent activist Alice Callaghan at her skid row community center.

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rect.”

When she decided that bilingual education wasn't working, she turned against it with the ferocity she has brought to other causes.

As for the parents, their motivation is all too simple. Their children need English to escape the sweatshop life. And by the parents' telling, their children weren't getting it.

“They were just teaching them in Spanish and nothing in English,” said Maria Hernandez, whose 9-year-old daughter, Ashley Almonza, was one of about 90 Las Familias children who boycotted classes at Ninth Street School two years ago to demand English instruction.

“I want Ashley to be somebody, have a good job,” Hernandez, 45, said through a translator when she came to pick up the third-grader after a day at the sewing machines, where Hernandez earns about \$240 a week.

She has always wanted her children to do well. She came to this country nine years ago because she needed to make more money to help send her three older girls to college in Mexico, where one now works as a nurse, one as an accountant and the third in computers.

She has heard criticism of Proposition 227 on Spanish-language radio, making her wonder: “Am I doing the right thing?”

Her resolve returned when she spoke to her neighbors. She says most of the people she knows favor the initiative because their children are being taught in Spanish.

The February 1996 boycott lasted for two weeks, drawing reporters aplenty. “You need all the help you can get,” said Callaghan, who had invited media attention from the beginning. “And because I am an organizer, I know we need to use the press.”

She depicted the school administration as obstinately resisting the parents' request to transfer their children into English-based classes. The school responded that the students were getting English in the bilingual curriculum—albeit some of it during recess and homework—and that only a handful of

parents had formally applied to move their children out of bilingual instruction.

From the administration's perspective, the Las Familias bilingual revolt was Callaghan's doing, not the parents'. But the school nonetheless relented. Since the fall of 1996, most of the Las Familias children attending Ninth Street have been in the English development program.

“They like it. It's a little hard for them,” Juana Lozada said, referring to her two children, Anna and Edgar Alvarado. When Edgar was in the bilingual program, he could speak some English but could not read or write it, Lozada said through a translator. Now Edgar's verbal English has gotten better and he is progressing with the written.

In the joyful din of the center, children speak Spanish among themselves. When they talk to Callaghan, asking for something or complaining of a playmate, it's in accented English.

“He hit me with the Lego,” reported one boy in a typical exchange, drawing out his vowels.

“Ultimately everybody learns to speak [English]. That is not the issue,” Callaghan said. “We're talking about children learning to read and write English.”

The center's children, Callaghan said, “would go all the way through elementary school and they would go into junior high, maybe reading and writing at a first- or second-grade level.”

A few months after the boycott, Unz called and said he was thinking about drafting an anti-bilingual initiative. Callaghan was all ears.

“When Ron came, we were ready,” she said, simultaneously conceding that “initiatives are not a great way to do social policy.”

But in this case, she said, a ballot measure is the only recourse. “There is no other way on God's earth, I am absolutely convinced, that the bilingual program will ever change in Los Angeles, ever. There is so much invested in the system.”

System. Invested. Callaghan's choice of words is telling. She sees

herself fighting the good fight on the part of the struggling poor, while portraying the chief bilingual education supporters as members of the Latino establishment protecting the status quo.

“These are all people who have a piece of the goods. They've gone to colleges and universities. They're lawyers. They're businesspeople. They're saying the children of garment workers should be learning to read and write Spanish.”

The offices of the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund are a few blocks from Las Familias. But “not once” during the boycott “did they call to help our parents, not once,” fumed Callaghan. “Because our parents were being politically incorrect. So none of the traditional supporters of garment workers would help.”

What of the fact that two of the leading proponents of the initiative—Callaghan and Unz—are white? What of the charges that Proposition 227 is the child of Proposition 209 and the grandchild of Proposition 187, just the latest Golden State slap at immigrants and minorities?

“The only people who are trying to say 227 is analogous to 187 are the activists,” she said. “Because they can't argue about bilingual education. Because there's no defense of bilingual education.”

“How is this any bit resembling 187?” Callaghan asked. “The roots of this are an attempt by impoverished garment workers to get an education for their children.”

A friend who does community organizing in Long Beach told her the Latino community there thinks of her as the “antichrist.”

She is unfazed, talking to reporters from as far away as Europe and consulting daily with Unz on the initiative, which calls for children to get no more than a year of intensive English instruction before moving into regular, English-only classes.

“What people need to focus on is not Ron Unz or me,” she said. “They need to focus on bilingual education. Has it worked? It's bilingual education on trial here.”

Bilingual Schooling Is Failing, Parents Say

The Los Angeles Times, 1/16/96, p. B1.

By AMY PYLE
TIMES EDUCATION WRITER

Las Familias del Pueblo is holding its first parent meeting in 13 years of providing after-school care to the children of garment workers.

Attendance is standing room only.

The subject that has drawn so many to the storefront center after a grueling day in the nearby factories: Bilingual education, is it working for our children?

And the gut feeling of these parents is: No, it is not.

While the debate over bilingual education rages in the halls of academia, it also erupts in venues closer to home and heart. And there, the sentiments do not always jibe with the latest research.

On this night, one father stood from his chair to articulate the quandary.

"A lot of us want our kids to learn Spanish so they can write to their grandpas or whatever," Lenin Lopez said in Spanish. "But I want my children to learn English so they won't have the problems that I've had."

The audience of more than 60 parents applauded.

Their children go to Ninth Street School, a Los Angeles Unified campus near downtown's skid row, where nine in 10 students do not speak English. Last year only six students, about 1%, mastered enough English to test out of the school's special bilingual classes.

Ninth Street's principal, Eleanor Vargas Page, considers the dissatisfaction voiced by the Las Familias parents ill-informed.

The school retooled its bilingual program just last year, Vargas Page said, infusing it with more English sooner

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than ever before. Those changes were a response, she said, to parent concerns as well as a districtwide push to speed the transfer of bilingual program students into the educational mainstream.

English reading now begins in fourth grade and next year Vargas Page hopes to start it in third grade. She gives worried parents a program schedule showing that their children spend most of the school day in English classes, though she concedes that homework and recess are counted in the English category.

And, she tells them, teachers report that students are flourishing.

"We know children are already acquiring English as a second language sooner . . . but anyone who wants to see statistics right now, I can't give them that," Vargas Page said. "The reality is, we won't see how well our children gain until five years into the program."

Such a promise of future rewards does not mollify the parents at Las Familias.

They consider English fluency the key to unlock the handcuffs of poverty, a key they themselves will probably never possess.

By crossing the border into the United States, they thought that they had secured that benefit for their offspring. But watching their children continue to struggle in English, year after year, has made them lose faith in the American education system.

They file their children past a visitor to prove their point.

"Say something in English," one mother prods her 9-year-old son.

"Animaniacs," the fourth-grader says, smiling. Can he write in English? He asks to have the question repeated, then answers, "No." Read? "A little."

These parents maintain that the elementary school has been unwilling to heed their requests for all-English instruction. Vargas Page said she has simply tried to explain the theories behind the existing program.

Programs such as Ninth Street's are based on research that favors giving immigrant students a strong base in their native language before immersing them in English. Although some other studies have advocated faster immersion in English, the most recent national study suggests that keeping students in native-language classes for at least five years gives them a better foundation for future academic success.

Beyond theory, Vargas Page cites the practical difficulties of separating some students for alternative programs in English on her 460-pupil campus.

"We don't have enough students to fill up [English immersion] classes at each grade level," Vargas Page said. "I might have to have four grade levels in one room."

Leading the parents' cause is Sister Alice Callahan, who founded Las Familias as part of her mission to help the poor and homeless.

She is heartened by the fact that Ninth Street School is part of the district's LEARN reform program, which aims to give teachers, parents and community leaders voices in campus administration.

Judy Burton, the district's top LEARN administrator, said she will meet with parents, administrators and Callahan later this month to try to determine if adjustments to the school's bilingual program are needed.

Under the district's current bilingual education plan, parents have the right to request English immersion classes for their children, Burton acknowledged, but school representatives also have the duty to explain why they think their approach is better.

"There's a dilemma when you have two different opinions of what the best approach is and they are such strong opinions," Burton said.

And though bilingual research findings are being cited by both sides, Los Angeles Unified has no data of its own on which teaching approach has worked best.

The district's high student transiency rate and its inadequate computer system make it impossible to track individual students or even groups of students to validate either the native-language classes that the school offers or the English immersion approach that Cal-

lahan and her parent group favor.

So Callahan relies on personal observation, and the broken English that she hears among the immigrant children in her charge.

Over the years, she has become increasingly alarmed because the Ninth Street students who spend afternoons at her center do all their homework in Spanish, she said.

They pick up spoken English from other children and television. But without formal instruction in reading or writing English, Callahan fears that they have no way of developing good grammar or a broad vocabulary, or preparing for middle school or college entrance exams.

"What we know is the bilingual system was intended to help children learn another language, and maybe it works in some places," Callahan said. "But we know our children are not learning to read and write in English. . . . And poor kids don't have the luxury of catching up later on."

Standing quietly in a corner as Callahan speaks is Moises Negrete, 16, who comes to Las Familias most afternoons for tutoring. He has attended Los Angeles Unified schools since kindergarten, including several years in the Ninth Street bilingual program. He lobbied his way into a magnet high school and now is fighting not to flunk out.

"I can read, but I can't understand what I am reading," he said, looking at his feet. "They never showed me the vocabulary I need now."