

Text: Workers Find Strength in Numbers

By The Asian American Education Project

Throughout U.S. history, labor has been tightly tied to race. The United States relied on the institution of slavery, with enslaved people providing the labor that spurred the nation's economic growth and power since its earliest history. After the abolition of slavery, Black people continued to be relegated to low-wage jobs with poor working conditions. As the United States expanded westward during the 19th century, demands for cheap labor grew and immigrant laborers were seen as the solution.

Tertiary Source:

Throughout U.S. history, labor-intensive and dangerous jobs have often been relegated to those with little power to find employment elsewhere, namely people of color and poor and uneducated whites. With the end of slavery, the United States filled demands for cheap labor with immigrant workers. These immigrants were subject to the existing **racial hierarchy** in the United States. As such, they faced differential treatment in regards to pay, benefits, and working conditions. For example, non-white immigrants were treated worse than white immigrants, but white immigrants were treated more poorly than native-born whites. This tactic served to create divisions among workers to keep workers in competition with one another and to discourage them from working together to demand better treatment. These workers took on dangerous, low-paying jobs in mines, on the railroads, in **agricultural** fields, and more. In many ways, immigrant laborers drove U.S. growth and expansion.

One such group of immigrant laborers were the Filipino men who began settling in California's Central Valley in the 1900s. Filipino immigrants worked as field laborers filling a demand for more workers on California's farms. Filipinos faced racial violence, housing discrimination, **anti-miscegenation** laws, and language barriers due to existing anti-Asian racism. Immigration restrictions kept Filipina women from migrating easily to the United States and anti-miscegenation laws prevented Filipino men from marrying outside their race, and so many male Filipino farm workers remained single into their old age. These bachelor Filipinos are called Manongs, a term of respect given to older men. As farmworkers, the Filipino men didn't receive healthcare or **pensions**, and faced long and back-breaking work hours, low wages, crowded living areas, and even non-functioning toilets.

Glossary:

Racial hierarchy: a system based on the belief that some racial groups are superior to others

Agricultural: related to farming

Anti-miscegenation: prohibition of marriage between people of different races

Pension: fixed sum paid regularly to a person, usually related to retirement



In September 1965, Larry Itliong (1913-1977), a Filipino labor leader, began to organize farmworkers in Delano, California. Itliong was a co-founder of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) and dedicated to seeking justice for workers. In Delano, he met with Filipino workers and convinced them to initiate a **strike** against the grape growers to demand better wages, the right to form a union, and more. After the strike began, Itliong and other Filipino leaders contacted Mexican farmworkers to join them in the strike to prevent the growers' ability to use Mexican farmworkers to break the strike. Cesar Chavez (1927-1993) and Dolores Huerta (born 1930), members of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), took the request back to their members. One year later, AWOC and NFWA merged to become the United Farm Workers (UFW) and stood together in the strike.

The Delano Grape Strike lasted for five years, through which the farmworkers supported each other and their families. The strike inspired many people across the country and around the world. The farmworkers also organized a **boycott** of grapes which even reached Europe. In July 1970, over thirty grape growers in Delano agreed to the demands to increase wages, contribute to union health plans, and control of toxic **pesticides** to end the strike. This victory would not have been possible without Filipinos and Mexicans coming together and building their bargaining power to win the demands they made. Furthermore, this effort also led to the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975, which provided **collective bargaining** rights for farmworkers across the state.

Another example of organizing with and for Manongs is the International Hotel battle of the 1960s and 1970s in San Francisco, California. Known as the I-Hotel, the single room occupancy hotel served as home for many Manongs, including retired migrant farmworkers, merchant marines, and service industry workers. It was one of the few buildings where the Manongs, who did not receive any retirement benefits, could afford to live; and if the hotel was demolished, they would be losing their homes and community. In 1968, the building's owner issued **eviction** notices to carry out plans to demolish the hotel to build a parking garage in its place. The community immediately pushed back, and in response to that pressure, the owners agreed to lease the building to the United Filipino Association for three years, temporarily saving the hotel from demolition.

Strike: to stop and disrupt work in order to force an employer to comply with demands

Boycott: to ban as an act of protest

Pesticides: substance used to kill bug harmful to plants

Collective

Bargaining: negotiation between an employer and labor union usually on wages, hours, and working conditions

Eviction: removal of a tenant from rental property by the landlord

In 1973, the I-Hotel was sold to another corporation, and the new owner issued eviction notices the next year. For three years, tenants and their supporters tried to fight the eviction orders. College students, activists, union members, and church members (from diverse racial groups) joined the struggle in support of the elders living in the I-Hotel. The fight for the I-Hotel grew to represent **displacement** pressures that were impacting other **vulnerable** communities. On the night of August 4, 1977, over three thousand multi-racial protesters joined to create a human barricade outside the I-Hotel in order to prevent the eviction of the fifty-five remaining, mostly elderly, tenants. However, police made their way through the protestors with their batons and used sledgehammers to break down the doors to remove tenants. In 1981, the hotel was demolished.

Despite the loss of the hotel, the nine-year fight and powerful protest on the night of the final eviction had a lasting impact. The determination of the remaining I-Hotel **advocates** led to the creation of the International Hotel Senior Housing with one hundred low-income housing units, and the I-Hotel Manilatown Center on the site of the old I-Hotel. Additionally, the struggle brought awareness to the need for neighborhood preservation and affordable housing for low-income people. Still, these small victories came too late for the majority of the evicted I-Hotel tenants, most of whom had passed away by the time the new hotel was completed. Of the original tenants, only a couple were able to move into the new I-Hotel.

Another impressive example of multiracial labor struggle took place in New York City in 2021 through the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA). Formed in 1998, the NYTWA quickly grew its membership to include drivers of different races, ethnicities, and backgrounds, creating a multiethnic membership representative of New York City's drivers. About 94 percent of taxi drivers are immigrants, and the majority of immigrant drivers are South Asian, followed by immigrants from the Caribbean. Accordingly, the NYTWA membership is made up heavily of Black and **Brown** drivers. By building strong relationships with drivers and centering their needs and demands, the NYTWA steadily grew its base to include over 21,000 members across taxi, app-based, and other professional drivers in preparation for its next strike.

In September 2021, NYTWA channeled three years of prior organizing for **debt relief** for drivers into a 24/7 **encampment** outside of City Hall. New York City's policy for leasing taxicab permits relied on **predatory** loans that placed drivers deep in debt. Drivers had been unsuccessfully requesting debt relief and aid for

Displacement: the act or process of forcing people to leave from their home or homeland

Vulnerable: at risk of being targeted

Advocates: one who defends or maintains a cause or proposal

Brown: a term used as an identifier for South Asians, Southeast Asians, and Latinx people

Debt relief: strategies aimed at making debt easier to pay

Encampment: camps set up by activists planning to stay for an extended period of time

Predatory: seeking to exploit or oppress others

Escalate: to increase in extent, volume, number, amount, intensity, or scope

years. By 2021, the average debt of leasing drivers was over \$550,000, and nine drivers had committed suicide due to their debt over the last few years. Drivers had decided that it was time to **escalate** their demand for debt relief and set up camp outside City Hall. Drivers, family members, elected officials, and community members advocated day and night for debt relief. After one month, a group of more than twelve drivers announced a **hunger strike**, again escalating their strategy to persuade the mayor to include debt relief in the city budget. Some elected officials and community members joined the hunger strike in solidarity; a few were even arrested in an act of **civil disobedience** to bring awareness to the strike through their elevated position.

The dedication of the drivers and their supporters paid off. After six weeks of non-stop **mobilization** and a fifteen-day hunger strike, the city agreed to restructure the loans to bring down the total driver debt and limit the maximum monthly debt payments. This victory was built upon the very first NYTWA strike in 1998 and the three years of advocacy and planning leading up to the 2021 strike, resulting in a huge win for a predominantly Black and Brown immigrant workforce.

Each of aforementioned struggles relied on the solidarity between workers and the support and solidarity of those with more power to be able to enact change. They had strength in numbers. They also did not waste time fighting each other. Instead, they joined forces to change an unfair system. If there had been any racial, ethnic, or other divisions, these campaigns would have had very different outcomes. Cross-cultural solidarity was key to helping champion workers and their needs.

Hunger strike:

non-violent tactic where participants fast as an act of political protest

Civil disobedience:

refusal to obey governmental demands or commands especially as a nonviolent and usually collective means of forcing concessions

Mobilization:

the act of putting things into motion

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