



Concentration camp at Manzanar. Photographer was an internee.

*45 years later*

# A step towards reparations for Japanese Americans

**John Ota**

**Forty-five years ago, in the spring of 1942, 120,000 Japanese Americans on the West Coast were rounded up and taken to remote U.S. concentration camps until the end of World War II.**

The government called this travesty of justice a "wartime military necessity." From babies to grandmothers, all were tagged like baggage and branded "spies and saboteurs," without a trial or a shred of evidence. On as little as 48 hours' notice, families were uprooted with only what they could carry, leaving behind homes, communities and farms.

In the camps, tar paper barracks stood beneath armed guard towers, with barbed wire all around, like a nightmare of Nazi Germany. Here the Japanese American people were held hostage by their own government for an average of three years.

Meanwhile young men were sent to fight the fascists in Europe, in the segregated, all-Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which became one of the most decorated units of the war. Others served in the U.S. Military Intelligence Service in the Pacific.

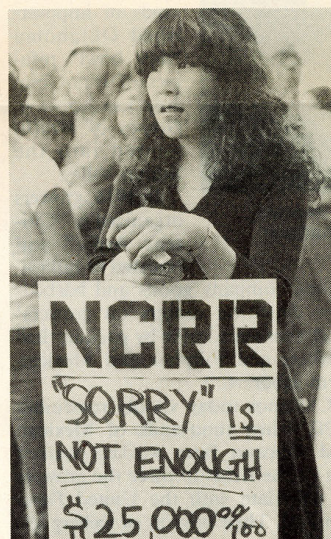
There was resistance to the camps from the beginning. Fred Korematsu, Min Yasui, Gordon Hirabayashi and Mitsuye Endo challenged the legality

of the camps up to the U.S. Supreme Court. By the end of 1942, a strike took place at the Poston, Arizona, camp, and a mass protest at the Manzanar, California, camp. Over 400 voted at the Heart Mountain camp to defy the draft until their rights were restored, and 100 Japanese American soldiers refused combat training while their families were behind barbed wire.

After the war, the people set out to rebuild shattered lives, in a virulently anti-Japanese climate. The need to redress the injustice of the camps burned inside them, but for now, most wanted to wipe away the memories and get on with their lives.

## Asian American movement

In the late 1960s, a new Asian American movement arose to fight for the people's rights in a militant and revolutionary way. Many were Sansei (3rd generation Japanese Americans) — children of the internees who came of age around the time of the Civil Rights Movement.



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In Asian American Studies classes, won through the Third World student strikes of the '60s, students learned about the camps as part of a long

history of racism and national oppression in the U.S. Turning anger into action, the first student/community pilgrimages to the camps took place in 1969. Later ones to Manzanar and Tule Lake drew thousands — former internees and those born since the war, seeking to reclaim their identity and heritage.

The young Asian American movement demanded nothing less than justice, equality and respect, and the camps issue was a rallying cry. Their ideas and actions had a deep impact on the older generations.

Momentum built through the 1970s. In 1978, the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) passed a resolution calling for \$25,000 compensation to each internee. In 1979, the National Council for Japanese American Redress (NCJAR), which is pursuing a class action redress suit, was initiated. The Committee to Reverse the Japanese American Wartime Cases, which led the appeals of the Korematsu and Yasui cases, traces its founding to 1980.

## NCRR founding

In November of 1980, the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations (NCRR) was founded in Los Angeles. NCRR brought together the Little Tokyo People's Rights Organization, Los Angeles Community Coalition for Redress/Reparations, Nihonmachi Outreach Committee, Japanese Community Progressive Alliance, Concerned Japanese Americans, Asian/Pacific Student Union and others active in the pilgrimages and Day of Remembrance commemorations. Significantly, the JACL and NCJAR were present at NCRR's founding.

Each of the organizations has contributed to the redress movement in different ways. What has distinguished NCRR is its approach that the people are decisive to win.

## Decade of struggle

There were many approaches on how to win redress. The approach that proved best able to advance the movement was one of uniting the broadest spectrum of the community behind the maximum winnable demands, while activating grass-roots community people to anchor the movement. "It's been the less well-off internees, mostly working people, who provided the firm stand and staying power that kept the movement on track and united," Bert Nakano, NCRR national spokesperson, told *Unity*.

In 1980 Congress established a commission to investigate the history of the camps. The movement's task became one of ensuring that the community's voice be heard.

Many questions arose. Could reparations be won? Is an apology alone enough? Should demands be put forward in testimonies at the hearings? Should the people rely on the commission's good will?

While the vast majority of Japanese

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In July, 1987, NCRR organized a 120-person delegation to lobby for redress legislation.



# Maine paper mill workers on strike

Out for a contract that's worth the paper it's written on

Rick Jurgens

Contributed

**JAY, MAINE — As 1,200 striking paperworkers at International Paper (IP) Company's Androscoggin Mill enter their 15th week on the picket line, their spirits are high.**

A guillotine leaning against the side of the local union hall offers "Free haircuts" for scabs and management. Everywhere in town, I ran into people wearing T-shirts proclaiming "Scabs Out, Union In," "Stop the IP Squeeze," and "Sure, I'll work Christmas — when pigs fly!"

The strike began June 16 when the mill's workers (members of United Paperworkers International Union Local #14 (UPIU) and the International Brotherhood of Firemen and Oilers Local #246) refused IP's contract offer with major cuts in premium pay, holidays and work rules, and the loss of 178 jobs.

As UPIU Local #14 Media Committee Chairman Pete Bernard told *Unity*, "We're not

striking for more. We're striking to keep what we've got."

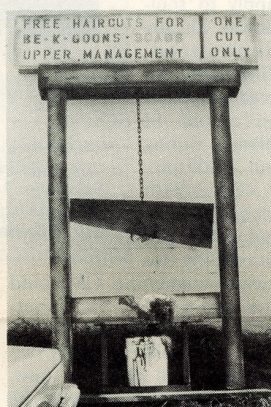
The Jay strikers are participating in coordinated bargaining arrangements with workers on strike or locked out at three other IP plants in Mobile, Alabama; De Pere, Wisconsin; and Lock Haven, Pennsylvania. IP, with its \$300 million in annual profits in 1986 and its 38% pay raise for the top 14 executives, is trying to force concessions contracts at many of their 65 domestic paper plants.

For the IP workers, already on rotating shifts, the company's proposal to eliminate Sunday and holiday premium pay would mean a 12-15% pay cut. The strikers, some fourth generation IP workers, remember when the mill used to shut down for weekends and seven holidays a year. Now, as striker Carl Stowe Jr. told *Unity*, "To save \$800,000 they want to eliminate the Christmas shutdown — the last holiday left to the strikers and their families."

IP has hired hundreds of scabs and has brought in 250 operatives from B.E. & K., a



The first IP strike in 66 years, strikers rally in high school gym in a display of militancy and organization.



"Free haircuts" for goons and scabs.

professional strike-breaking firm based in Alabama.

## Strikers get organized

Although this is the first strike at IP here in over 66 years, the strikers are well organized. On one Wednesday

evening, I joined more than 1,000 strikers and their families as we packed into the local high school gym to chant, sing, hear reports on negotiations and strike activities from local leaders, and hear support statements from local politicians. Then people formed a huge motorcade past the mile-long mill, honking horns and encouraging friends on the 24-hour picket lines.

The next morning, a steady stream of cars rolled through the drive-through food bank, where a couple of dozen strikers and supporters in blue T-shirts loaded each car with groceries in less than a minute.

Every evening, hundreds of strikers gather at the roadside, just beyond the boundaries of the court injunction limiting the number of picketers, to identify and harass scabs.

The strikers also enjoy wide-

spread support. An August 1 New England-wide march brought out nearly 9,000 supporters. Strike preparations were aided by the State Labor Federation and by UPIU Local #900 in Rumford. Strikers are receiving discounts and donations from local merchants and extensions of loans from banks and their credit union.

The Ku Klux Klan called a rally in Rumford September 26, hoping to exploit the strikers' anger. Says Peter Kellman of the state AFL-CIO to *Unity*, "Klan OUT, Union In. We see them as scabs." When the Klan rallied, counterdemonstrators outnumbered them ten to one.

The strikers are determined to stay united and win. Jim Cieslak, a striker with 22 years in the mill, declared, "We made our decision in June to go out and stay together!"

## Redress . . .

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Americans today support monetary compensation, many then were not yet sure it was feasible or justified. But at the 1981 hearings, the moving, plain-spoken testimonies of the internees about the toll of the camps won overwhelming support for at least \$25,000 in compensation.

Bert Nakano explains, "Nothing can pay people back for their shattered lives, lost homes, farms and businesses. But we felt an apology was not enough." "If we get compensation, they will think twice before they do it again," adds Tsuyako "Sox" Kitashima, a 69-year old grandmother active in NCRR in San Francisco.

NCRR confronted the commission with demands for hearings at times and places accessible to the community, with testimonies given in Japa-

nese and English. Hundreds turned out, taking the government's hearings and making them their own.

Community groups also raised demands for a community fund to provide for social needs, to help rebuild a community life destroyed by the camps. It was proposed that a board, elected by the Japanese American communities, oversee this fund.

After the hearings, the main question was how to win reparations. Some pursued a class action suit against the government. Others, including the NCRR, supported this suit but felt congressional legislation was more promising.

The NCRR's legislative campaign was built in a united-front way, with mass community initiative. Only a handful of die-hard right-wingers like then-Senator S.I. Hayakawa were never seen as part of this united front.

Congressmen Norm Mineta and Robert Matsui at first were not optimistic about the idea of a congressional bill. It was Rep. Mervyn

Dymally who worked with NCRR to sponsor the first redress bill, showing once again the role of the Congressional Black Caucus in fighting for democracy for all peoples.

"If we get compensation, they will think twice before they do it again."

House of Representatives passed a redress bill on September 17 this year.

Called the Civil Liberties Act of 1987, it passed by 243-141, and includes an unprecedented provision for reparations of \$20,000 to each camp survivor. The Senate is expected to overwhelmingly pass a similar bill. While falling short of the community's original demands of \$25,000 to former internees and their heirs, the bills are nonetheless a testament to the mass support for reparations and to

a decade of struggle.

After Senate approval, the bills will go to a House-Senate conference committee, then to President Reagan. "If (Reagan) doesn't sign (the bill), the whole world will know instantly what a hypocrite he is," says former internee Jim Saito of Los Angeles.

Jim Kajiwar, a longtime NCRR member in San Francisco, told *Unity* that when he heard of the House vote, "Tears came to my eyes. . . . But I also felt sad because of my folks and all my friends who had passed away and couldn't share in this."

"It was like being told the war was over when we were over in Italy," said Bill Kochiyama, a 442nd Regimental Combat Team veteran from New York, who witnessed the House vote.

Bert Nakano sums up, "The vote is a tremendous victory for the grassroots people who stuck with it all these years, and for friends of all nationalities who gave us support. Ours is a victory for everyone struggling for justice."