

“¡YA BASTA!” Reflections on Asian and Latino Workers in the Immigrant Rights Movement

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Over the past three years, a whirlwind of reports have circulated in newspapers and the hums of disgruntled conservative news pundits have filled airwaves. This latest cause of controversy, the latest so-called “threat” to American civilization is the uproar of an incipient, Latina/o-led immigrant rights movement that has organized in schools, neighborhoods and workplaces across the country. Policy analysts and rightwing forces complain that this movement represents the “Hispanic challenge” and signals the “clash of civilizations.” Some others discuss the immigrant rights movement as “awakening a sleeping giant,” bringing to the surface repressed memories of immigrant radicalism that have defined workplace struggles in this country for centuries. As participants in the 8-hour workday movement in the late 19th century, members of the early Industrial Workers of the World, rabble rousing miners, striking railroad workers, and insurgent laundry and garment workers in the 19th and 20th centuries; immigrants of all colors have organized and fought both the U.S. state and employers, long ago disproving the stereotype of immigrant workers as helpless, frightened victims of American capital.

Amidst the debates on both the left and the right about this movement, there has been a deafening silence in considering one question: where are all the Asians? Aren’t there communities of Asian workers whose labor is also being exploited within the U.S.? Isn’t Asian-Latina/o solidarity important for this burgeoning immigrant rights movement? Or are all Asians middle class, business owners, A+ students, and model minorities as they are often painted to be?

The U.S. has a rich history of Asian-Latina/o workers’ solidarity that undermines any illusions that Asian immigrants are somehow opposed to or absent from working class immigrant radicalism and rebellion. In the early 1900s , for instance, agricultural workers organized the Japanese and Mexican Labor Association (JMLA) in Oxnard, CA, and went out on strike over pay and control of working conditions. Some 1,200 farm workers, or approximately 90% of the workforce, stayed out for over a month until the Association was able to win various gains from employers. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) offered to represent the striking workers but refused to allow Japanese laborers into its federation. The JMLA in turn declined the AFL’s offer and opted for multiracial class solidarity instead, unwilling to compromise class solidarity on the behalf of white supremacy. Several decades later, Filipino and Yemeni farm workers joined with Mexican laborers to organize the United Farm Workers (UFW) in California. Philip Vera Cruz and Cesar Chavez became household names of the farm worker’s movement. More recently, the Korean Immigrant Workers Association (KIWA) gave its support to Latina/o workers who were organizing against Korean and Korean-American employers in Los Angeles.

Despite brave efforts like these, today’s movement has yet to fully explore the potential for Asian-Latina/o solidarity that it contains. The immigrant rights movement has undoubtedly declined over the past year, but it is neither dead nor defeated. How Asian workers will be integrated into this larger movement, and on what terms, will be critical to its advancement. How can Asian and Latina/o workers organize together from the bottom up? What is deterring this solidarity now? On what basis and around what politics can Asian-Latina/o solidarity be revived and advanced?

The “Immigration Crisis” and the Invisibility of Asian workers

Many sense that there is a growing crisis in American society. The downward economic spiral that working class communities have been facing – wages cut, pension plans and benefits gutted,

city infrastructures, education and public health torn asunder – has created a juggling act for the U.S. political elite as it struggles to maintain high profit margins for American business while subduing an increasingly agitated working class.

Official society complains that this economic and social crisis is being caused by unchecked immigration (and immigration of the “wrong kind” of people at that) and competing tendencies have offered an array of so-called solutions. Expulsion of undocumented workers? No, that would mean fewer cheap laborers for American capital. Amnesty for undocumented immigrants? No, because that would mean alienating a growing white populist constituency that increasingly articulates its frustration against capitalism as a form of anti-immigrant racism manifested most succinctly in militias like the Minutemen. Militarize the U.S.-Mexico border? Higher application fees for citizenship? Guest worker programs? Back and forth the political elite go, attempting to reconcile and alleviate the tensions that are inherent in the current political and economic order.

The immigrant rights movement has represented a definitive “¡ya basta!” to the decades-long capitalist attack on the working class and its manipulation of immigration to cover that attack. This movement has international implications, in that it connects the attack on American workers with the ongoing neo-liberal assault against workers in third world countries. The two are, in fact, parallel and inter-dependent processes.

American capital has been expanding rapidly across the world, tearing up the countryside of scores of nations as it loots and plunders their resources. Many former farmers are unable to find work in the growing cities and migrate even further to American towns and cities. This has been accomplished through the complicity of national ruling classes in countless countries whose own tenuous class rule often couldn't be achieved without American dollars and weapons. This is coupled today by the rise of other capitalist powers in East and South Asia, whose growth has made both landless and jobless millions of workers within their own borders. And yet the “immigration crisis” has been portrayed largely as a crisis of Latina/o immigration, ignoring its connection to these global trends.

The invisibility of Asian workers in this debate is telling on two fronts. First, under the logic of white supremacy, Asian immigrants have been identified as a model minority and thus have not been seen as a social or political threat in the way that Latina/o immigrants are portrayed. In fact, their “racial superiority” has been used as a foil to attack other people of color and has been a contributing factor deterring Asian-Latina/o solidarity. Second, the model minority myth has propped up a small, highly educated middle class of Asian businesspeople with conservative politics as the representative image of all Asian immigrants. This obscures the presence of Asian sweatshop workers, service workers, and industrial workers in small shops across the country. Because they are so-called model minorities Asian immigrants supposedly do not yield the same potential for a burgeoning working class movement, and thus are often ignored in discussions about immigrant radicalism.

You won't need to take a fine tooth comb through history to find that both of these justifications for Asian “invisibility” hide an underlying class and racial reality. Despite being a so-called model minority, Asians have been regularly targeted by the U.S. state for attack. This is not only the case internationally, where areas like Iraq and Afghanistan are under military attack by U.S. imperialists or others like Iran and Korea face the prospects of similar campaigns. Inside the U.S., the Patriot Act has also dealt heavy blows to Asian communities – in particular plaguing people of South Asian and Middle Eastern origin and descent – where the infiltration of spies into mosques and temples, and heavy surveillance by both local police and federal law enforce-

ment has led to many false arrests and cases of entrapment. Deportation and the detention of both documented and undocumented people has been a political tool for the American ruling class to attack the self-organization of immigrant communities inside U.S. borders; to disrupt the solidarity expressed between Arabs and Muslims here with anti-imperialist forces in the Middle East; and to create an atmosphere of fear and repression that serves to silence the rest of the U.S. population, whose aspirations and instincts for a different kind of society could otherwise coalesce into a national movement. We should not ignore that there is a class basis to the Patriot Act, which has disproportionately targeted working class communities of color.

Besides this one dynamic of state violence against Asian immigrants, grassroots violence also has its own independent and long history. Dating back to the 1800s, groups like Anti-Coolie Leagues and Anti-Chinese Associations have boycotted California ranchers who employed Chinese workers. Organized labor is not without its shameful past; the White Labor Union, the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League, the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and other labor groups have all organized and/or allied with white supremacist attacks against Asian laborers during the 19th and 20th century. In the 1920s a “Swat the Jap” campaign was initiated by the Ku Klux Klan and the Native Sons of the Golden West which included violence against Japanese residents and housing and labor exclusion of Japanese workers. The 1943 Zoot Suit Riot saw attacks mostly on Mexicans, but also on Blacks and Filipinos. Today the Minutemen, and other white populist anti-immigrant groups, trace their lineage to this history of vigilantism. We should not doubt for a moment that such forces, after dealing with the “Hispanic Challenge”, would direct the same energies towards Asian folks. Many Asian immigrants have used both civil disobedience and armed means to defend themselves, and we would be wise to closely study and advance those traditions today.

From the West Coast to the Gulf Coast: Drawing Lessons from the Past and Present The model minority myth only goes so far when it comes to state and grassroots violence. Despite depicting Asian immigrants as non-threatening and as one monolithic socio-economic category, the model minority myth has not protected Asians from the violence of white supremacy in American society. Yet, the myth still exists. What is its material basis? What purpose does it serve? What does it have to do with class? And how is that affecting Asian-Latina/o solidarity within the immigrant rights movement? Rather than tackle these questions abstractly, it would be better to locate their answers within the context of two concrete examples: the 1992 Los Angeles Riots and post-Katrina New Orleans.

The 1992 L.A. uprising began after the acquittal of four police officers charged in the severe beating of Rodney King. This event acted as a lit match to ignite the dynamite of long-growing racial and class tensions in South Central L.A. Large numbers of Latinos and Blacks seized goods from stores, set entire buildings on fire, and fought cops and the National Guard when the latter attempted to suppress the rebellion. Anger over the situation was so fierce that Seattle, Atlanta, Las Vegas, and other cities also saw several days of demonstrations and riots. Attempting to preserve the wealthier areas in L.A. from violence, the police blocked off streets and directed protestors towards L.A.’s Koreatown neighborhood instead. At the end of the rebellion, some 1,500 Korean American businesses were destroyed.

Headlines proclaimed the L.A. riots a “Black-Korean” ethnic conflict. Others showed armed Korean store owners as heroes and heroines protecting the American dream (private property) from destruction. Still others depicted a Korean community victimized by brutal mobs for its hard work ethic, honesty, and successful entrepreneurship. In rushing to paint this as a race war,

many failed to explore two key questions: why did Blacks and Latinos attack Korean businesses? And why weren't Koreans also joining the rebellion in large numbers?

To understand the first question we must see the L.A. riots as a rebellion over both racial and class tensions. There were undoubtedly expressions of anti-Korean racism – which in any future rebellion would need to be opposed by anti-racist minded Blacks, Latinos, Koreans, and others – but the larger momentum among Blacks and Latinos went into an attack on property relations, which had been a prominent form of their exploitation and interwoven into their exclusion from the “American Dream.” That a large number of Black and Latina/o-owned businesses were also burned to the ground demonstrates this class relation. In fact, many Koreans had bought their South Central liquor stores from former Black owners who had acquired the stores after the Watts rebellion in 1965 but had gotten tired of getting robbed and attacked by working class and unemployed Black and Latino youth.

Further, it is important to see why Korean immigrants opened up small shops in predominantly Black and Latina/o areas. Contrary to what some might argue, this was not out of a desire by Koreans to exploit Black and Latina/o customers. Rather, structural restraints – both linguistic barriers and economic factors – largely prevented Koreans from opening up businesses in the more affluent white neighborhoods. They typically didn't have the capital available to operate anywhere besides the poorest neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the 1970s saw an accelerated deindustrialization of L.A. and the flight of large chain stores from poor people of color neighborhoods. Affordable healthy food was virtually nonexistent and the small liquor stores and corner stores were a poor substitute for grocery stores. Many residents were angry about the lack of options and directed this rage against the small Korean shops. Belated plans by multiracial community coalitions to replace liquor stores with food markets were unsuccessful.

Not all Korean immigrants were business owners, nor were even a majority, but they tended to have a higher frequency of business ownership over Latinos or Blacks for two reasons. Historically, Black folks have had the least access to capital in American society and thus tend to have the lowest levels of business ownership, along with the highest levels of unemployment. In addition, the business ties between the U.S. and South Korea and other booming capitalist economies in Asia boosted immigrants' access to the capital necessary to open businesses. Most reports of the riots ignored these material realities. Instead, viewers glued to TV screens across the country, watching the unfolding rebellion, saw countless images of Korean storeowners defending their shops with guns and one over-simplified, racist message emerged: Koreans were hardworking immigrants who had the wherewithal to “make it” in America, and for that they were being punished by less capable people of color.

Herein lies the purpose of the model minority myth: it is not merely a stereotyping of Asian immigrants but rather it is an appendage of white supremacy that estranges Asians from other people of color in order to keep Asians from rebelling with them and in order to further criminalize their rebellion. While upholding Asians as a model for other people of color, the constraints of white supremacy and capitalism keep Asian immigrants in constant, direct competition with other people of color for limited infrastructural and economic resources. Capitalism's final solution for neighborhoods is to withdraw basic social infrastructure, leave various groups to fight it out over the remaining crumbs, and then seal the whole area off with a militarized cordon, a containment system of cops, cameras, and prisons. This fed the flames that erupted in Los Angeles in 1992.

Yet this still doesn't account for the apparent lack of Koreans expressing solidarity with Blacks and Latinos in the streets during the rebellion. What was perhaps a primary contributing factor to this absence was that so few Koreans actually lived in Koreatown, despite its name. At the time of the riots, only about 10% of Koreatown was actually Korean; the majority living there, and working in the Korean restaurants and small shops, were Latinos. Many Korean shop owners questioned how their own Latina/o employees could burn and seize goods from the store. They were used to exploiting the labor of their own nieces, nephews, and distant cousins, smoothing over the tensions inherent in the employer-employee relationship with a concept of ethnic and family loyalty. But in reality much of the working class in Koreatown was Latino and hence didn't buy into this loyalty.

The consequences of this factor become more apparent when considering those businesses which were family-run, where the employees were all related or close kin to the owners. For many Korean workers in that situation, because of their closeness to the employer, an attack on their relative's shop often led to a defense of private property rather than collusion with the rebellion that was going on right outside their storefront. Historically, the social relation of small mom-and-pop shops has blurred the distinction between shop owner and the wage-earning employee, and the Korean owned stores in L.A. were no exception. Some young Asian shop workers might have been frustrated by the fact that they had to work long hours for exploitative uncles, aunties, and parents and some may have felt tempted to join in the rebellion. But the family bond was a lot harder to overcome for young Asian workers being exploited by their families than by young Latino workers being exploited by people they had no social connection to.

This is related to a larger problem. Mom-and-pop storeowners, while often coming from a working class background, generally have a different position in the capital-labor relation and see their interests as separate from the working class. The shopowner may face the constant threat of bankruptcy due to competition with larger chain stores and corporations, but they see that their ownership of a store (their means of production) and being "their own bosses", although limited, are two things the working class is denied in daily life. The independent producer – be they owners of a small shop or skilled craftspeople who work for themselves – prefers her position, even though it becomes more precarious every day, to that of the working class person, who herself is constantly trying to climb up into the ranks of the middle class. As an intermediate class of sorts between the ruling class and working people, the impulse of these middle class elements is not to join a rebellion against capitalism and white supremacy but rather to choose whatever side seems to be able to secure their class position.

This is not to say that middle class folks can't be won over to rebellions and revolutionary politics; only that it will take both mass upheaval and strong, independent working class self-organization – whose demands, strategies, and visions are defined by that class – to win them over. The middle class political orientation of the Korean community at the time of the 1992 rebellion, and its lack of independent working class organizations, meant that Korean workers for the most part stayed divided from the other communities of color. This problem was deepened by feelings of anti-Black racism amongst the Korean middle class. Such a context prevented until after the riots any exploration of what their involvement in the rebellion could've meant. In future rebellions this political choice will be absolutely decisive.

Race, Class, and ‘Recovery’ in New Orleans

The “recovery” of post-Katrina New Orleans betrays another example of the problems undermining Asian-Latina/o solidarity. The headlines speak volumes. “An Immigrant Community Thrives.” “Vietnamese Rebound in New Orleans.” “The Vietnamese American Community Recovers After Katrina.” Rightwing correspondents remark that perhaps “other communities” of New Orleans should follow the example of their Vietnamese neighbors and stop “waiting” for government hand-outs. Story after story, readers are reminded that the Vietnamese are a strong people – as though endurance were an intrinsic characteristic they were born with – whose example should be truly enlightening for the “rest” (read = Black folks) of New Orleans. These headlines ignore the problems Vietnamese folks have faced post-Katrina, including detentions at the hands of immigration officials and the denial of recovery services due to failure to prove citizenship. Yet those details are less important to reporters and racists. What is important is a thinly veiled racist logic that justifies the destruction of the Black working class of New Orleans and the intentional prevention of their return home, on the false premise that they’re not working “hard enough” to recover.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Latina/o workers have come to the Gulf Coast to find work in the rebuilding of numerous towns and cities. They have been a preferred workforce because they have been filling labor shortages at low wages, with little to no benefits, and are by and large seen as a temporary workforce. Many are undocumented, and as employers turn a blind eye to this fact, local elites and politicians feel assured in the docility of Latina/o immigrant laborers who, they assume, can be easily disposed of if they get organized and rebellious or when rebuilding needs are met and their labor is no longer needed. ICE raids and visits from the Department of Homeland Security are already foreboding the possibility of increased harassment, detention, and deportation of these workers.

Latina/o labor has in fact been used to break the last legs of Black working class communities who were living in New Orleans and along the Gulf coast before Katrina. While some politicians have called for a massive tightening of immigration policies post-Katrina and others have applauded Latina/o workers for their “good work ethic”, both camps have pointed an accusing finger at unemployed and underemployed Black workers who are seen as the bane of New Orleans’ existence. Yet with automation, outsourcing, and declining social infrastructure, New Orleans had years ago become a de-industrialized shell of its old self, leaving thousands of Black workers without a means of livelihood. This process, along with Katrina’s physical destruction of Black communities, laid the groundwork for the dismantling of Black self-organization that was on the rise in the 1960s. It is pure propaganda to chide Black folks to “get a job” because their jobs simply are not going to come back. Official society saw Katrina as wiping away this “demographic problem” and has intentionally used Latina/o labor to prevent its return.

In reality, most Vietnamese folks face a similarly bleak future. Testimonies that attribute the high recovery rate amongst Vietnamese Americans to some sort of innate racial character ignore that New Orleans was home to a largely middle class Vietnamese community. Predominantly working class Vietnamese communities in places like Biloxi, Mississippi, have had little success in returning home or finding any sort of economic stability. Economic policies implemented by the Biloxi City Council have opened land and coastline to casinos and the tourism industry. In doing so, they are eliminating any viable recovery of the fishing industry which employed a sizable portion of the Vietnamese community before Katrina and Rita hit. Meanwhile, Vietnamese

families, largely renters and not homeowners like in New Orleans, have received little to no assistance in securing new housing.

Tensions may continue to develop as the situation worsens in the region. Black folks, Latinos, and Asians are being positioned (yet again) in competing roles, roles which are abstracted from the material realities these communities currently face. Without an autonomous organizing effort – independent of the NGOs, non-profits, and political parties – this could further breakdown potential for anti-racist solidarity and a Gulf Coast recovery from below. A lack of organization on the job and a tendency among organizers to focus on “providing services” to the detriment of building working people’s power has contributed to feelings of competition for aid, resentment, and mistrust between people of color. There are some organizations that have made inroads into organizing amongst all three communities, such as the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance (MIRA), yet this work must be expanded.

Prospects for Solidarity

We’ve seen some of the factors that have deterred a higher level of Asian-Latina/o solidarity in recent times. We can speculate how Asian and Latina/o workers might actually organize together from the bottom up, and further, on what basis and around what politics Asian-Latina/o solidarity might be revived and advanced.

Within the immigrant rights movement, there have been important developments of local union militancy and new workplace strategies. In a number of cities across the country, Asian and Latina/o immigrant workers find themselves in similar jobs and industries, if not workplaces. Many work in labor-intensive, long hour and low wage jobs for small workplaces like grocers and restaurants, or in more isolated positions like custodians and caregivers. There are multi-shop and neighborhood orientations which strengthen the possibilities for victory among relatively isolated workplaces like small grocers and restaurants. The growth in workers’ centers across the country has encouraged solidarity across workplace and industry lines.

Such solidarity is instrumental not only on an anti-racist front. On another level, strikes, sit-ins, pickets, and other forms of direct action on the job can be difficult to sustain at small businesses without solidarity from other workplaces, and when isolated it can be even more difficult for labor campaigns to spread and be sustained in other locales. Latina/o and Asian immigrants also find themselves working together in low skilled positions in larger workplaces, such as in poultry plants in states like North Carolina and Georgia, or as staff in hospitals and hotels. There have been successful organizing campaigns among delivery workers in New York, among hotel workers and garment workers in California, and among agricultural workers in Florida, so we should have every expectation that Asian-Latina/o solidarity can be built in new and creative ways that speak to the conditions of labor today.

Ultimately, solidarity should not be mistaken for an abstraction. The political character that inevitably shapes such solidarity will be key. Some solutions have been offered by the immigrant rights movement, though the shortcomings must be sorted out from the strengths. One tendency within the movement has attempted to revive a liberal-labor coalition where the middle class helps the ruling class formulate new policy on how to overcome the current “immigration crisis.” This leadership has pushed the movement to ride the coattails of the Democratic Party and trade union bureaucracies, a relationship which has only weighed down grassroots organizing

in bureaucratic red tape and lobbying. Meanwhile direct action and rank & file control of the movement are discouraged or even outright opposed.

Our current historical predicament shows that both direct action and autonomous organizing from below are necessary now more than ever. The liberal-labor forces have gone so far as to make connections with big business interests to hold some sway with Congress but they have absolutely no social base for such a coalition. The old base of the “social democratic” coalitions linked to the liberal labor and state bureaucracies was dismantled during decades of neoliberal “planning” that broke down both rank and file institutions in the workplace and social infrastructure in working class communities. This breakdown was facilitated because the union bureaucracy, joined in the 1970s by the middle class, collaborated with the bosses to attack the self-organization of everyday people.

Many of these same class tensions are present within Asian immigrant political organizations and they demonstrate that these sorts of cross-class alliances are a dead-end road. The only alliances that can secure victories for Asian workers will be united fronts which are defined by and organized around working class, not middle class, demands. Asian workers are increasingly confronting a small Asian American employing class that has been exploiting them in Chinatowns, Manilatowns, and other immigrant enclaves across the country. When Asian workers protest they are chastised and reminded of the favors done for them by their “benefactors”, of the hostile racism of American society that the employers are protecting them from, of the debts they may owe for their travel into the U.S., and more. The time has come for Asian workers, alongside Latina/o workers, to refuse to be beholden to any employer, Asian or non-Asian.

The immigrant rights movement must overcome the contradictions of this tendency within it. There can be no “partnership” between labor and capital, between oppressed communities and the ruling class, because the establishment of such a partnership requires not only working people’s loyalty to imperialism but also to a closed shop in terms of immigration. It is not by separating our struggle from that of workers in other countries that we will get our “slice of the American pie.” Rather, because their impoverishment and alienation under capitalism is interdependent with our own, it is only by building with them, not against them, that we will create a strong movement.

There has been important ground covered in this respect, as seen by the diverse crowds present at anti-Minutemen protests in cities across the country. Some organizations, such as KIWA, the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice and the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance (MIRA), have made this a cornerstone of their organizing. Yet this work must be advanced. The examples of 1992 L.A. and 2008 New Orleans show how racial and national divisions can undermine a larger rebellion. Anti-immigrant racism by American workers (of any color) and likewise anti-Black racism by immigrants must be challenged and defeated wherever it may come up. They also demonstrate that dependence upon middle class liberalism only derails working class activity and rebellion.

As pointed out in the beginning of this article, there is a proud tradition that we can draw from today as we build stronger Asian-Latina/o solidarity within the immigrants’ rights movement. We cannot be frightened by the challenges – of state and grassroots violence, of increasing poverty and dismantling of social infrastructure – nor can we be sidelined by the contradictions present in the movement itself. It will only be through the autonomous self-organization of working people, immigrant and non-immigrant, that we will take a decisive step towards a new society and a new way of living for all.

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