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Practitioner Essay

Asian American Studies and the Fight for Worker Justice

Kim Geron, Loan Thi Dao, Tracy Lai,
and Kent Wong

Abstract

This essay explores higher education–labor partnerships in the contemporary era between Asian American Studies (AAS), the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), and AAS community partnerships. With the intensified attacks on workers, unions, and Asian American, Pacific Islander, and other communities of color, the importance of higher education and labor and community partnerships will be a valuable resource to expand critical research and participatory education. These partnerships embody the community studies’ roots of AAS. Using three case studies, this essay highlights these partnerships and concludes with a discussion of the opportunities and challenges students can experience when working in labor union spaces and recommendations for building university-labor partnerships.

Introduction

The emergence of Asian American Studies (AAS) on university campuses fifty years ago was a result of the demand by Asian Americans and other students of color to learn about their own histories and communities in the United States (Murase, 1976). Asian American history had been largely ignored or minimized throughout their K–12 and college education. As a discipline, Asian American history has largely been grounded in the experiences of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) workers, and from the inception of AAS, labor and community issues were deeply interconnected. While academics focused on the history of the Asian American community, including contributions of Chi-

nese railroad workers and plantation workers in Hawaii, AAS scholars also included practitioners who worked in the community and had direct experiences with unions and working people.

An important labor campaign that occurred during the inception of AAS was the formation of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union and the five-year Delano grape strike that was first launched by Filipino workers. This labor-based campaign built an ongoing connection between universities, labor unions, and struggles of AAPI workers. Over the years, the role of AAPI workers has expanded the field and curriculum of AAS, and Asian American students have been integral partners in the fight for AAPI worker rights. This essay explores higher education-labor-community partnerships in the contemporary era between worker justice organizations and AAS. With the intensified attacks on workers, unions, and Asian American and other communities of color, the importance of higher education and labor partnerships will continue to be a valuable resource to expand critical research and education, and to continue the tradition to fight for justice. These partnerships embody the community studies roots of AAS.

A Brief History of the Connections between AAS and Labor Issues

As AAS emerged in the late 1960s, ongoing struggles of AAPI workers became crucial to the expansion of AAS curriculum and the participation of young activists in these fights. A historic effort of Filipino and Mexican farmworkers to launch the Delano grape strike led to the formation of the United Farm Workers of America (UFWA), and a movement to win better working conditions in California's agricultural industry. Students in AAS classes and Asian student organizations traveled to the Central Valley of California to meet farm workers and to study their working conditions (Galedo and Mar, 1970; Maeda, 2012) and to support the construction of a retirement home for aging Filipino farm workers named Agbayani Village. They learned from the "manongs" (first-generation Filipino migrants) such as Larry Itliong and Phillip Vera Cruz, who organized workers into the UFWA. This campaign galvanized fledgling AAS programs, mobilizing faculty and students who joined in the call to boycott grapes, and brought urban young people into contact with rural farm workers.

In addition to the UFWA grape boycott, other community-based labor issues were integrated into the curriculum and research by AAS programs including historical accounts and contemporary campaigns. The following are a few examples of important labor issues that erupted in ethnic communities during the 1970s. These campaigns are important

to note because they featured the challenges faced by low-wage Asian immigrant labor including men and women; they were also grassroots campaigns that involved active support from workers and other elements from Asian ethnic communities and helped build the Asian American movement. These campaigns were discussed as part of AAS courses, and students were able to relate their own experiences growing up in America with these worker campaigns that at times involved their own families.

The struggle at the Confucius Plaza in New York's Chinatown in 1974 drew many members of the community into a campaign to demand the hiring of Chinese American workers, who were systematically excluded from being hired, to build a major housing development in Chinatown (Asian Americans for Equality; Yanagida, 1976). The grassroots campaign to hire local residents of the Chinatown community in 1974 for the construction of the Confucius Plaza and the subsequent campaign to oppose police brutality after the beating of community member Peter Yew in 1975 drew national attention regarding the plight of Chinese Americans in Chinatown. AAS classes and students participated in supporting these efforts in the New York area by joining in the numerous rallies and pickets that took place at the worksite, and they also organized educational programs on university campuses. Professors and students discussed this case of racial discrimination in their AAS classes and connected the experiences of the discriminatory hiring practices in New York Chinatown to similar experiences of other forms of discrimination directed at Asian Americans throughout the country.

Also, in 1974 in San Francisco, 135 mostly Chinese immigrant women workers went on strike at the Great Chinese American Sewing Company (Jung Sai) for better working conditions and pay. This strike lasted seven months, and AAS courses at San Francisco State University and University of California Berkeley and other local schools focused on the strike and building support for the Chinese women workers. Many AAPI students learned about the working conditions facing immigrant workers and became directly involved in the support committee (Liu, Geron, and Lai, 2008; Maeda, 2012). Many students in AAS classes could relate personally to this campaign, especially those with family members who worked in the garment industry in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York where it flourished from the exploitation of Asian immigrant labor.

A third example took place in Seattle, Washington, where young Filipino labor leaders Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo organized workers in the Alaska Cannery Workers Union and mobilized Filipino com-

munity resistance against the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines. These young labor activists linked worker struggles for democracy in their union with global solidarity to oppose martial law in the Philippines. Viernes and Domingo were assassinated in 1981 in their union hall in Seattle by agents of the Marcos dictatorship. A protracted campaign for justice ensued, and AAS classes and students in the Seattle area actively participated in the campaign for “Justice for Domingo and Viernes” (Domingo, 2017; Withey, 2017).

In the 1980s, links between AAS, labor, and the AAPI community also emerged following the racially motivated murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit in 1982 at the hands of two white autoworkers. These workers were angry about losing their jobs to Japanese car manufacturers and singled out Mr. Chin because they thought he was Japanese. The white autoworkers were allowed to plea bargain to the lesser charge of manslaughter and were sentenced to probation. This shocking verdict triggered a national campaign to win justice for Vincent Chin. The Vincent Chin case galvanized AAPI community members who opposed anti-Asian sentiment, and racial violence targeting Asian Americans (Espiritu, 1992). This case sparked broad interest in AAS courses, and students, faculty, and staff on many university campuses organized campus and community programs about racial injustice. Vincent Chin’s mother, a Chinese immigrant, courageously spoke out, and galvanized support for the case (Zia, 2010). The Vincent Chin case emerged as a landmark AAPI civil rights campaign embraced by campus and community activists across the country.

The year 1982 also marked the massive demonstration of 20,000 New York Chinatown garment workers to demand better pay and working conditions, organized by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. This was the largest demonstration by AAPI workers in history, and exposed the substandard working conditions and low pay of Chinese immigrant women workers (Kwong and Lum, 1988). The issue of Asian American sweatshops again attracted national attention in 1995 when seventy-four Thai immigrant workers were freed from slavery from a compound in El Monte, California. Several other anti-sweatshop campaigns were taking place during the same period against such clothing manufacturers as Forever 21, Jessica McClintock, and Guess Jeans, for their use of sweatshop labor including large numbers of Asian immigrant workers in their garment manufacturing chain.

All these campaigns had direct involvement by AAS students with the support of faculty. Students conducted research on the companies,

and they joined workers to organize protests at retail stores to expose the poor working conditions and exploitation (Wong and Monroe, 2006). The history of AAPI workers over the past fifty years has directly influenced the field of AAS and galvanized AAS students to conduct community-relevant research and to engage in activism. As students have learned more about their history, they have been compelled to become involved in labor and community struggles that include AAPI workers.

The Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA) was established in 1992, and it represented the first national organization of AAPI workers within the national AFL-CIO. APALA has brought together AAPI union leaders and workers, forged stronger partnerships between labor and AAPI communities, and strengthened connections between the field of AAS and the AAPI workforce. Three cases studies involving the University of California Los Angeles, Seattle Central College (SCC), and the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMass Boston) help to illustrate this partnership, and how it has been mutually beneficial to the field of AAS and to AAPI workers. The first case examines the multifaceted efforts of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center and UCLA Labor Center programs to build partnerships focused on AAPI workers.

Partnerships and Leadership Pipelines at UCLA

The UCLA Labor Center and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center have enjoyed a long partnership in advancing research and activism with AAPI workers. The emergence of both centers grew out of social activism of the 1960s, just five years apart in 1964 and 1969, respectively, and a demand that the university be responsive to the needs of workers and communities of color. Kent Wong, the founding president of APALA, became director of the UCLA Labor Center in 1991. That same year, the first joint publication between the UCLA Labor Center and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center was released: *Philip Vera Cruz — A Personal History of Filipino Immigrants and the Farmworkers Movement*. Philip Vera Cruz was the second vice president of the UFW, and the highest-ranking Filipino union leader in the country. Vera Cruz joined other Filipinos to launch the historic grape strike in Delano, California in 1965, and the formation of UFW represented a merger between a Filipino American farm worker organization and a Mexican American farm worker organization. The UCLA Labor Center worked with the UCLA Asian American Studies to sponsor a national speaking tour with Philip Vera Cruz to promote the book, and Philip was honored at the APALA Founding Convention on May 1, 1992.

The UCLA Labor Center has published three other books highlighting the contributions of Asian American worker organizing. *Voices for Justice: Asian Americans and the New American Labor Movement* (2001), features ten pioneer AAPI union organizers from throughout the country. *Sweatshop Slaves: Asian Americans in the Garment Industry* (2006) exposes the rampant abuse facing garment workers, including the notorious sweatshop in El Monte, California, where Thai immigrant workers were freed from slavery in 1995. *Organizing on Separate Shores: Vietnamese and Vietnamese American Union Organizers* (2009) portrays Vietnamese and Vietnamese American union organizers who share a common bond in advancing worker justice.

For nearly thirty years, Kent Wong has taught the UCLA AAS course Asian Americans and the Law, with Stewart Kwoh, Executive Director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice, and over the years, UCLA students have been encouraged to participate in community service activities with AAPI workers and communities. UCLA graduates have been instrumental in the launching of a number of worker centers in the Los Angeles AAPI community, including the Koreatown Immigrant Worker Advocates, the Pilipino Workers Center, the Thai Community Development Center, the Restaurant Opportunities Center, and the Garment Workers Center.

Los Angeles has emerged as the national focal point of the Worker Center movement, a group of community groups grounded in specific ethnic communities and/or industries, representing worker rights. Many of these workers have historically not been included in unions who did not prioritize the organizing of immigrant workers and workers of color.

UCLA alumni, including Aquilina Soriano, John Delloro, and Jay Mendoza, were founders of the Pilipino Workers Center. UCLA alum Chancee Martoree was the founder of the Thai Community Development Corporation. UCLA students and alum were instrumental in launching the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Association, the Garment Worker Center, and the Restaurant Opportunities Center.

To encourage the recruitment of training of Asian American organizers, the UCLA Labor Center partnered with the UCLA Asian American Studies Center to sponsor the APALA Organizing Institute. The first APALA Organizing Institute was held in Los Angeles in 1992, and for more than twenty-five years APALA has held annual organizing institutes throughout the country to recruit and train a new generation of AAPI organizers.

Perhaps no single individual better represents the nexus between AAS and the fight for worker justice than John Delloro. John was a student at UCLA when he first recruited to be a union organizer through one of the first APALA Organizing Institutes shortly after the APALA Founding Convention. As a UCLA undergraduate, John helped to spearhead the boycott of Jessica McClintock, a high-end fashion designer who had profited off the backs of unpaid Chinese American garment workers. John was also one of the founding organizers of the Pilipino Workers Center and worked at the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Association.

John, a student of Asian American history, connected to the relationship between the Asian American experience and labor history. He studied about the long history of Asian workers, who faced relentless exploitation from the railroads to the fields of California. As a Filipino activist, he felt passionately about the first-generation Filipino Americans, the manongs, who worked their entire lives in low-wage jobs, and never emerged from poverty.

After graduating from UCLA, he began work as an organizer for the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union, and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). John brought his passion and talent as an organizer to hotel, clerical, government, and healthcare workers. But the most important organizing campaign of his life, and the one that he was proudest of, was when he successfully organized the hospital where his mother worked as a nurse in Northridge, California.

John Delloro's time as a union organizer was among the most demanding and intense years of his career. He was thrust into a position of leadership, charged with changing the culture of a major public-sector union to embrace a more progressive vision. John's most stressful times, in truth, were his conflicts with union leaders who were resistant to change and who openly sabotaged his leadership. When he suffered a heart attack, this was a wake-up call, and he decided to leave his career as a full-time union organizer.

John completed a master's degree in AAS at UCLA and taught in the UCLA Asian American Studies program. He inspired young AAPI students to get involved in their communities through his own activism and leadership. John served as the Founding Director of the Dolores Huerta Labor Institute, the first multi-campus labor studies program established within the Los Angeles Community College District. He worked with faculty from all nine community college campuses to advance labor stud-

ies classes and events and to recruit students to work for social and economic justice.

In 2009, John was elected president of the APALA. This was a huge accomplishment for such a young scholar and activist, and the highlight of his career. As an undergraduate, John had been inspired by Philip Vera Cruz, the highest-ranking Filipino American union leader in the country. Fifteen years later, John Delloro emerged as the highest-ranking Filipino union leader in the country.

His position back in academia allowed John more balance in his life. He was eating healthy, exercising regularly, and spending more time with his wife and two young children. John tragically passed away from a second and massive heart attack in 2010 at the age of thirty-eight, but his legacy continues to inspire people throughout the country. John Delloro exemplifies the many AAPI students, who, in addition to their own family experiences, were able to deepen their understanding of workers issues, labor unions, and workers centers while at UCLA.

The next case explores how a local community college has created a space to connect students through internships and student learning experiences with the AAPI labor movement in Seattle.

Learning through Experience: Seattle Central College and Seattle APALA

SCC was founded in 1966, as Seattle's first two-year college and the nineteenth in Washington state. Located just north of downtown Seattle, SCC has been a natural gathering point for rallies and protests, such as Occupy Seattle (2011) and social justice marches opposing war and in support of undocumented students and immigrant rights, Black Lives Matter, and Womxn. Today, SCC's student body is about 55 percent students of color, including 18 percent AAPI students. Overall, a majority of students are part-time, are first-generation college students, and must work in addition to navigating an unfamiliar college culture. SCC is a unionized campus, and faculty are members of the American Federation of Teachers—Seattle (AFT), Local 1789, the largest affiliate of the AFT Washington state federation. Both Local 1789 and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) State of Washington Human Rights committees collaborate with the Seattle chapter of APALA, thus providing some infrastructure to facilitate partnerships between higher education and the labor movement.

Seattle APALA formed shortly after the founding of the national APALA. AFT members were part of the chapter but not in leadership until

the 2000s. As a Seattle APALA chapter officer and national executive board member, Tracy Lai learned about opportunities for youth and students in the labor movement and began to incorporate these possibilities through service learning as assignments in her history courses. Service learning contextualizes community volunteer work (sixteen to twenty hours per quarter) with academic study, especially reflection and connecting theory to practice. The service-learning site (partner) was Seattle APALA or a union such as UNITE HERE Local 8. Seattle APALA also accepted University of Washington (UW) interns through the Harry Bridges Labor Center. Interns could earn credit and/or fulfill community experience hours or be paid for an eight- to ten-week position.

AAS at SCC began in 1971 as a result of sit-ins organized by the Oriental Student Union, led by Mike Tagawa and Alan Sugiyama. Tagawa's declaration, "The time of the quiet Asian has passed," along with a petition signed by 1,000 supporters, a lockout of the administration from their offices, and support from community groups such as the Japanese American Citizens League pressured SCC administration to hire one of the first AAPI faculty and administrators, Ben Yorita. The legacy of this student organizing is SCC regularly offers Asian American History and Sociology of Asian Americans. In both of these courses, students learn about community issues and organizations. Students may earn extra credit by attending community events and writing response papers. For deeper exposure, students may choose service-learning as a major individual project. Service-learning introduces students to community organizations and services, as well as unions with a large number of AAPI members such as SEIU and UNITE-HERE.

Lai finds that the high enrollment and high-frequency courses, such as the U.S. History survey and Pacific Northwest History, have a larger number of students who choose to do service-learning with a union or an AAPI community organization (housing, social services, or news media). The service-learning portfolio of writings allows a more personal voice in documenting their interest and in proposing their site in connection with the course and their volunteer hours. Students write journal entries and reflection essays that connect their service-learning with course themes such as advocacy and organizing. Students are eager to go beyond the usual course framework in a classroom and to interact with people who are experiencing what the texts describe. Students remark that the "hands-on" aspects of service-learning are also more real life than familiar library methods assignments. Students may also experience direct personal relevance in understanding issues that have

been part of their own experiences such as homelessness.

For example, in a U.S. History 1 course, a student, Dan F., chose FareStart as his service-learning site. FareStart teaches culinary arts to formerly homeless people. On one of his food deliveries, Dan recognized the site as a place that he had stayed during a difficult time in his life. Writing about his service-learning with FareStart and reflecting on the history of poverty in the United States gave him closure as he neared graduation from SCC, something that had once seemed completely out of reach (Facundo, 2017). Helen O., an international student who experienced visa issues and possible deportation, found many similar concerns with the workers. A memorable moment was a workers' rally held for members at Sea-Tac airport. Helen learned about a successful campaign that won \$190,000 from LSG Sky Chefs and that, of the 200 attending workers, only two were American born. She learned firsthand about issues experienced by immigrant workers and could frame the current issues with the historical struggles for immigrant workers' rights (Otganbaatar, 2017).

Outside the structure of service-learning and coursework, Amy L. met APALA as a newly graduated high school student and joined Seattle APALA's Obama phone banks in 2008. In an interview with Lai (2018), Amy recalls the inspiration of attending the 2009 national APALA convention with a group of youth all sponsored by the Seattle chapter: they met young people from around the United States, as well as AAPI labor leaders and rank and file. Amy could literally see the numbers (hundreds) and the power of unity. In 2011, as a college student, she served as Seattle APALA's Civic Engagement intern with a focus on a Renton City Council race. This was her first experience with building a Get Out the Vote campaign and the challenges of door knocking and securing volunteers. After graduating, Amy worked for UNITE HERE in Las Vegas and has recently returned to Seattle, once again working for Seattle chapter as membership director.

Akson M. joined Seattle APALA while still a sophomore at the University of Washington (UW). Through APALA, he learned about Jobs with Justice (JWJ), a national organization founded in 1987 to fight for workers' rights, and with JWJ's help, Akson founded a chapter of Student Labor Action Project at UW. Seattle APALA helped sponsor Akson to participate in the 2004 New America Freedom Summer, focused on registering immigrant voters and where Akson experienced some of his most intense canvassing experiences as part of the Arizona cohort. Akson explained to Lai (2018) that he realized becoming a labor organizer was a logical path because he could see the difference that could be

made by organizing workers who could then do more for themselves. Akson has worked for various locals of the SEIU and is currently at SEIU 1199 NW. Kent T. met Akson through a JWJ internship while fulfilling the last requirements of his bachelor's degree. He then did a paid internship with Seattle APALA that focused on building partnerships with community organizations, as well as creating the first database and website for Seattle APALA. Kent told Lai (2018) that as an ethnic studies major, he had imagined that his future work might be in immigrant or civil rights organizing. He had not realized that unions could be such a site for this work. As an intern, shadowing another labor organizer gave him insight into how to talk with people, identify their issues, and problem solve. Kent's work as an organizer has taken him through several SEIU locals; American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees; and currently, United Food and Commercial Workers 21.

The experiences of former interns with Seattle APALA reveal that their academic inspiration came from their ethnic, Asian American, and labor studies courses, while their practical internships were directly with Seattle APALA or a partner union. The internships provided a structure for experiencing the labor movement, mentorship, and access to a network of possible job recruitment. As Amy stated, "I took political science courses, but it's not the same as in real life. There's no book or essay that substitutes for hands-on experience" (interview with Lai, 2018).

The challenges of institutional collaborations at SCC with a community partner include level of supervision at the site, facilitated reflection to process the experiences, and clearly communicated expectations at both the site and the course. SCC has a part-time service-learning director who speaks directly with community partners in the initial placement and regarding any problems that may arise such as dissatisfaction on the student or community partner's part and no-shows. SCC's service-learning program was first launched by an Americorps intern. A permanent part-time director was hired to build upon that first Americorps year. The fact that the director position was never a full-time position reflects both budget constraints and that the program was not envisioned as a large-scale entity. Fortunately, the part-time director shares an office area with Multicultural Services and Cooperative Education and these staff can answer service-learning questions when the director is not available. However, the part-time hours clearly limit the scale of activities such as outreach to more community partners and recruitment and training of faculty to incorporate service-learning pedagogy. Over time, the director has built strong relationships with a wide array of community

partners, but the labor focus has evolved from Lai's interests and roles in both AFT and APALA.

To sustain future institutional collaborations with labor and community organizations, the following elements are critical: on the college's side, staffing such as a director and resources to keep service-learning visible and viable; support from the college president and vice president of instruction; faculty commitment and valuing of service-learning as an essential component of active learning; and student awareness and expectation that service-learning be more widely available in their courses. When labor and community organizations clamor for students to participate in their campaigns and day-to-day work, colleges will be responsive. Over time, community partners become more interested in accepting service-learning students or interns when these experiences demonstrate meaningful outcomes, especially when the student seems like a possible recruit as an organizer.

An important role of APALA is offering mutual support to young or new organizers. This support may take the form of mentorship or interventions through the network of APALA leaders. The small but relative success of the Seattle chapter can be partially attributed to Lai's active involvement in both APALA and AFT, thus being in a position to access and build support through both structures simultaneously. Continuing to recruit additional API faculty and staff to play similar roles in fostering collaborations—a community activist pipeline—must be ongoing. Amy, Akson, and Kent add to a new wave of API organizers in an historically white labor movement. The next case explores how a faculty member in an AAS program in Boston works with her immigrant students to create awareness and connections with the local Asian American community that lead to ties with community-based organizations.

Building Community Connections at the University of Massachusetts (UMASS) Boston

UMass Boston is the only public four-year institution in the city of Boston. UMass Boston has a student population of approximately 17,000 that is embedded in diverse, largely immigrant, working-class neighborhood, adjacent to one of the largest Vietnamese American communities in the country and close to Chinatown. UMass Boston families have an average family income of \$46,050 and median family income of \$29,270. More than 70 percent of students seek financial aid, and yet still must work part-time to full-time jobs while in school. Thirteen percent of students identify as AAPI, with Chinese and Vietnamese American as

the largest subgroups (UMass Boston Office of Institutional Research), making the school an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI) federal designation.

The majority of AAPI students are 1.5- and second-generation immigrants, who either immigrated as adolescents or were born here to immigrant and refugee parents. Many of the AAPI students still struggle with mastering critical English reading and writing skills. Proposed academic support programs have intentionally focused on bolstering services for English Language Learners. With the school's AANAPISI federal grant, the AAS program had the opportunity to design and teach an Intermediate Seminar (IS). IS courses are required for most majors as a preparatory course for the high-stakes Writing Proficiency Exam, which all students must pass to graduate. Departments across the university teach IS courses, which have different topical foci but must meet the standard writing intensive requirements set by the university. As a new faculty member, Loan Dao saw this as an opportunity to create her own course, named Rise Up! Asian American Leadership and Social Change, in which students would learn about the history of Asian American resistance, activism, and social movement in the United States generally, and in New England in particular.

Over the past six years, Dao has taught the course in ways that promote community engagement. In content, students learn about the migration history from the perspective of AAPIs, and with the theme, "We are here because you were there," denoting creation of migration streams from Asia and the Pacific Islands to the United States as a result of a history of labor recruitment and U.S. political, economic, and military interventions in Asia Pacific. This content was integrated into contemporary issues in AAPI communities, such as housing, labor, and immigration challenges, and the emergent leaders spearheading social change within their own communities and in interracial coalitions. The course gave students the opportunity to be exposed to the idea of AAPIs as leaders and activists, a new way of thinking about AAPI migration and contributions to the United States. They read about the impact of the Spanish-American War on the Philippines, the development of military bases and territories throughout the Pacific, and the recruitment of labor throughout Asia and the Pacific to both Hawai'i and the mainland. Conversely, they also learned about the ways in which communities resisted their oppression, based on their collective ethnic, national, and class identities to build relationships with community organizations in ways that critique the racialization of AAPIs in the United

States and globally.

Elected representatives and intergenerational community activists regularly came to the class as guest speakers to share their personal stories of how they became civically engaged and their personal perspectives on the campaigns in which they were involved. Prior to the development of the course, the majority of students, who represented majors across the university, were not even aware that AAPIs were engaged in the electoral process or community organizing, much less ran for office or conducted successful campaigns. Dao often invited leaders who have ongoing relationships with the labor movement, such as Executive Director Lily Huang of JWJ, Executive Director Monique Nguyen of MataHari Domestic Workers alliance, and Mark Liu of Chinese Progressive Association (restaurant workers and fair housing campaigns). Assignments included attending community events and conducting research into an Asian American leader, as well as into a national or local AAPI organization to analyze its leadership styles and programs.

Additionally, Dao included group research projects that involved researching a campaign, conducting interviews with community stakeholders, observing meetings and events related to the campaign, and conducting research on the campaign issue. These opportunities for exposure to new ways of understanding and viewing AAPIs consistently resulted in undergraduate students reporting that they felt more connected to the political process and social justice issues within their communities and in coalition with other communities by the end of the semester. Significantly, they became connected to organizations and leaders who could mentor them and offer them spaces to enact their new knowledge.

Some significant outcomes have resulted from these relationships with these course-community relationships. First, students have continued their relationships with community organizations and found internships and employment with them. They have also joined campaigns such as the anti-gentrification efforts in Chinatown, workforce development programs for working-class Asian Americans, and the campaign for \$15 minimum wage. Second, their exposure to AAPI community leadership and campaign development taught them how to critically analyze the circumstances and impact of high-stakes writing exam requirements of the university, and they effectively critiqued this mandate such that the university has begun to explore alternatives to the exam. Finally, the relationships also have stimulated workers from our community partners to return to school through the UMASS Boston undergraduate and graduate programs in labor studies and ethnic studies, creating a cyclical

structure for movement building. Recently, UMass Boston has revived its Labor Research Center and APALA has opened a new chapter in Boston. This offers Dao and the students in this course new opportunities to integrate students into current campaigns involving unions directly, as well as providing students with tools that will contribute to the diversity and needs of AAPI workers.

These three case studies in Los Angeles, Seattle, and Boston highlight the close connections that have been built between AAS programs and their respective local Asian American communities including with APALA and Asian American workers. The next section will discuss some perspectives on connecting college students using AAS and the labor and community.

Discussion: Opportunities and Challenges for Students in the Labor Movement

The process of integrating student activists within the labor movement has been challenging. Many AAPI students come from working-class families and bring with them an understanding of racism and class exploitation. At the same time, a textbook understanding of gender, race, and class does not automatically translate into an ability to organize and the skills needed to engage workers to take action.

Organizing requires an understanding of the individual and the collective, of the local and the global. Activists must have the knowledge and skills to conduct one-to-one communication, have culturally sensitive listening skills, and address the fear workers face of being fired or retaliated against for their activism. At the same time, AAPI young people often face the stark realities of unions that are run by older white men, embrace a top-down hierarchical and bureaucratic culture, and demand long hours of work into the evening and on weekends.

Many young people experience fatigue and alienation in the labor movement. However, new leaders in unions, such as Jessica Tang, the president of the Boston Teachers Union, and local workers centers, such as Monique Nguyen of Matahari Women Workers' Center, Jyoti Sinha of the South Asian Workers' Center, and Fiona Yu of the Chinese Progressive Association's Worker Center, have made a conscious effort to recruit and develop AAPI workers and leaders that challenge the status quo in the movement in their collective fight for economic justice. These new leaders include the working-class AAPI population at UMass Boston, and they help bring the critical analysis that AAS that intersects race, gender, and class. Jessica Tang and Karen Chen, the Executive Director

of Chinese Progressive Association, have organized a new Boston chapter of APALA, which will further bring unity across unions and workers centers at the site of pan-ethnic solidarity. As a new generation of AAPI young people are rising into positions of leadership in their respective unions, especially in public-sector unions, service worker unions, and worker centers, the role of AAS in training working-class students and prioritizing the histories and perspectives of working-class AAPIs. AAS courses have the potential to train these students to develop a critical analysis of the neo-liberal agenda of global empire.

Conclusion

AAS is grounded in the study of AAPI workers. From the Chinese American railroad workers who built the Transcontinental Railroad, to the fight against sweatshop conditions among garment workers in New York Chinatown; from the Delano grape strike in California to the assassinations of Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo in Seattle, the history of Asian and Pacific Islanders is indelibly linked to worker struggles and unions. As AAS continues to be an entry point for AAPI students to learn their history and to get involved in community struggles, these programs benefit from embracing their roots of community involvement and organizing.

As our three case studies highlight, the decades of partnerships that have been built between various AAS programs and labor unions, AAPI workers, and organizations such as APALA have produced numerous benefits and positive outcomes for universities, AAPI communities, and students who participate in these campus community collaborations. These outcomes include the creation of courses that integrate materials on the history and contemporary struggles of AAPI workers that provide students in AAS courses with the foundational information to better understand the role of race, class, and gender in the workplace, as well as the role of unions in improving the lives of AAPI workers. The inclusion of community service and service-learning programs for students, a hallmark of AAS since its inception, connect AAPI students with various labor organizations and worker centers to provide experiential opportunities that strengthen university-labor partnerships. Next, we would like to offer a few recommendations for AAS and labor to build deeper partnerships and cooperative relationships. These suggestions are based on our practical experiences working with students and in the community including labor unions and campus entities.

Recommendations for AAS and Labor to Collaborate

1. Build a campus curriculum that focuses on AAPI studies and labor studies to help prepare students to work in the labor movement. At UCLA, there is a labor studies minor and several classes in AAS that focus on the history of AAPI labor issues. There are also fieldwork, internships, and classes that offer work with community organizations that provide excellent training to become labor/community organizers while in school. While many AAS programs do not have dedicated courses focused around labor issues, the issues of immigrant workers both past and present are discussed widely in AAS programs. Other AAS programs that may not have courses focused on AAPI labor issues can use other introductory and upper-division courses to integrate worker issues and invite guest speaker to address labor.
2. APALA is putting together AAPI worker-related curriculum that will be available to unions and the community on its website for broader reach and accessibility. Having accessible resources for instructors and students about AAPI workers will help build awareness of AAPI worker concerns and promote a broader understanding of worker movements beyond their campus.
3. Students should gain applied experience working as interns with labor unions, workers centers, and community organizations that provide services and organizing of low-wage and immigrant workers. The placement of students can take place during the academic year and can continue into more substantive opportunities during the summer months when students can work full-time for a union. The “Dream Summer” program at the UCLA Labor Center, and summer internships at unions such as UNITE-HERE and SEIU provide excellent summer opportunities. These programs provide resources so students can earn paid internships while continuing their education. Undergraduate students who participate in these internship and service-learning experiences learn firsthand from workers and the organizations that represent them about the challenges that workers face. Connecting with workers directly is qualitatively different from an academic environment where workers are only the subject of study. By work-

ing in a union or worker center, students also develop their critical thinking skills, increase their knowledge of organizational culture, and develop opportunities to gain entry into the labor movement. With regard to graduate students, labor organizations need researchers, policy analysts, and other graduate-level skills for their on-going work. This experience builds critical job skills, provides students with job opportunities, and also could identify future areas of advanced research or dissertations.

4. Building campus-community partnerships are not without their challenge. Here are some factors to consider:
 - a. Evaluate the local political context. Depending on the location of the AAS program, the opportunities to work in the AAPI communities will vary based on geography, access to local communities, unions, and organizations. The organizations or local movement may not be racially integrated, and thus AAPI students may face challenges in labor spaces where they may experience exclusion or discrimination. When possible, AAS programs should seek to build ongoing relationships between their university and appropriate organizations which could provide a positive internship or service-learning placement. Cooperative joint programming and joint supervision of students can provide a mutually beneficial experience.
 - b. Evaluate campus resources and policies. The AAS programs that want to build labor and community partnerships have to follow university rules and policies that oversee internships and service-learning opportunities. This will require AAS faculty to work with the campus office that oversees these student placements. Faculty and staff with experience in developing these agreements could be helpful in navigating the campus processes. We recommend AAS programs and labor organizations set up formal agreements to place students in their organizations to follow campus guidelines and to forge collaborative relationships for the long term.
 - c. Promote labor and social activism. While many AAS faculty and departments focus on community and participatory research, not all campus programs encourage active engagement with labor unions and community partners,

especially involving organizing or social action. To set the foundation, it is helpful to promote speaking engagements at AAS events and classes to feature the stories of AAPI workers, and former students who are currently on the staff of unions, worker centers, and community organizations. This will expose students to learn about unions and workers centers and will provide opportunities for interested students to participate in union and worker centers projects on a volunteer basis.

Reflections on Future Collaborative Efforts

Organizations such as APALA collaborate with faculty and students in their respective communities to build solidarity and work together on campaigns to advance progressive policy change, end sweatshops, oppose workplace discrimination, and raise the minimum wage. These partnerships introduce students to the working conditions and challenges facing AAPI workers. The examples of campus-community collaborations in Los Angeles, Seattle, and Boston demonstrate that vital partnerships between higher education and labor organizations continue to thrive. These case studies provide examples of how the historic link between worker justice and AAS continues today.

Worker justice has been central to the development of AAPI identity, history, and social movements. Collaboration between campus, labor and the AAPI community benefits AAPI students in developing critical thinking skills and experiential knowledge. Higher education partnerships with the labor movement and community organizations have changed the course of history over the years and will continue to be a key element to prepare the next generation in the fight for justice.

Notes

¹ Also emerging in the 1980s–90s were new worker centers based in the Asian American communities such as Chinese Workers and Staff Association, Asian Immigrant Women’s Association, Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance, Filipino Workers Centers, and Chinese Progressive Association. Given limited space we will not discuss their roles and their connections with AAS.

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