# Race Relations and the Political Economy in Hawai'i

Ah Quon McElrath

*Ah Quon McElrath writes with authority on this subject having lived through and participated in many of the events of the twentieth century in Hawai'i. Ah Quon's experience and perspective are strengthened by her knowledge of Hawai'i's history.*

The nature of race and ethnic relations in Hawai'i was and continues to be shaped by a number of key factors: (1) the 1778 landing of the English Capt. James Cook, and the subsequent trips of another Englishman, George Vancouver, and others which ended the isolation of the Hawaiian Islands; (2) the 1820 arrival of the New England missionaries with their varied religious and business interests; (3) the world-wide importation of nearly four hundred thousand indentured/contract laborers beginning in 1852 to work in agriculture; (4) the advent of labor unions (particularly after the 1935 congressional enactment of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA)), especially the International Longshoremen's & Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), now renamed the International Longshore & Warehouse Union, with its message of the right of workers to join a union of their own choosing, the strength of an industrial union open to anyone regardless of race, color, creed, and sex, and the importance of participation in the electoral process; and (5) events such as the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893 with the subsequent annexation in 1898 by the United States; the murder of a Caucasian youngster by a young Japanese in the 1920s; the rape/murder trial of five local young men, with the murder of one of the five by US Navy associates of the woman alleged to have been raped; the 1954 displacement of the decades-old power of the Republican Party by a Democratic Party invigorated by the activities of the returning soldiers of Japanese American ancestry (AJAs) and the utilization of ILWU voting strength which had manifested itself in successful political action; the granting of statehood to Hawai'i in 1959; and the 1965 congressional enactment of the Immigration and Nationality Act based on the philosophy of reuniting families by the elimination of the quota system for a system of preferences.

## Historic Background

Cook's, Vancouver's, and others' journeys to Hawai'i introduced a completely different group of people and lifestyles to a Hawaiian chiefly system that ruled in a finely crafted hierarchy which defined personal and economic relationships.

These visits also introduced diseases for which Hawaiians had no immunity, one of the reasons for the rapid decrease in their numbers.

Many historians have accepted 300,000 as the number of Hawaiians in 1778, said to have decreased to half by the time of the missionaries' arrival in 1820; further, that by 1860, the Hawaiian population was said to have dropped to sixty-seven thousand, or about 22 percent of the 1778 number.

These journeys to Hawai'i, with the development of the sandalwood and whaling trades, hastened a change in the political economy. Wealth was measured not only in terms of personal and household items but also in the procurement of arms and gunpowder, the latter which altered power relationships among members of the Hawaiian ruling class.

The coming of trade afforded Hawaiians a world view and provided royalty and commoner alike the opportunity to venture beyond the confines of the eight inhabited islands of Hawai'i, Maui, O'ahu, Kaua'i, Moloka'i, Lāna'i, Ni'ihau, and Kaho'olawe. Moreover, the change in the political economy contained the seeds of converting Hawaiians to wage laborers, thus destroying communal, yet stratified, relationships with the ruling class.

When the missionaries arrived in 1820 under the auspices of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, their primary interest, as it was in missions to other parts of the world, was to convert the indigenous people to Christianity. However, the needs of the missionaries to build the infrastructure to promote their religious activities, to grow food, and to get the printed word to converts thrust them into close relationships with the monarchy, thus easing the path to conducting their mission and to furthering their business interests.

The convergence of business attitudes – that wealth could be found in agricultural enterprises – and religious attitudes – that salvation from a lackadaisical life could be found in land ownership – culminated in the 1848

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enactment of the "Great Māhele" (land division) among the king, government, and chiefs under the aegis of Kamehameha III and the Hawaiian legislature, with subsequent amendments which defined the rights of commoners to own land. Land, therefore, became a commodity, the concept of use right supplanted by property right, and the system of communal land thereby destroyed. Commoners might have been left with a land title, but possessed little else to make their way through a tortuous legal maze to insure water rights as well as access to fish, wood, and other materials for living.

Thus the rights of commoners were not fully resolved by the Māhele. Therein lay the major complaint of the Hawaiians who connected the loss of their identity and sovereignty to the loss of their land.

In the drive for wealth through agricultural pursuits, business interests insured converting Hawaiians in their subsistence economy to wage laborers by the passage in 1850 of an "Act for the Government of Masters and Servants," which defined two types of workers – apprentices in the areas of "art, trade, or profession, or other employment" and those engaged "by the day, week, month, year, or some other fixed time, in consideration of certain wages" (Beechert 1985:42; quoted from the *Penal Code* 1850:170-77).

The declining native population and the lure of the outside world, e.g., riches from the California gold rush, meant that agricultural interests needed to look elsewhere for workers, other than through the control of "these people [who] are indolent" and whose "natural indolence [is such] that money alone, which could be afforded for labor, would not sustain a regular supply of labor" (Beechert 1985:41, quoted from a survey among missionaries conducted by Minister of Foreign Relations, R. C. Wyllie, in May 1846).

The minister of the interior, Gerrit P. Judd, and the minister of foreign affairs, Robert Wyllie, in their discussions with King Kamehameha III in 1847 anticipated the need for both land and labor even before the passage of the "Great Māhele" and the Masters and Servants Act (in the economic interests of businessmen). Among other things, it was noted:

> I most respectfully urge your Majesty the policy of granting lands in the most liberal manner to all your subjects – of extending cultivation or grazing over your whole islands – of encouraging foreign labor whenever native labor is found to be insufficient for the quantity of land to be

cultivated, and of receiving kindly and liberally those foreigners of good character who may come (quoted from Beechert 1985:31).

The Act provided that a "person who has attained the age of twenty years" could "bind himself or herself [...] for a term not exceeding five years" (Sec. 1417; quoted from Beechert 1985:42). Although the Act provided measures to prevent abuses, the Penal Code was used widely to apply sanctions to workers who broke the provisions of their work contracts.

## The Sugar Industry

Thus the Māhele and the Masters and Servants Act provided the impetus for business interests to build the sugar industry. Land and water were available and foreign laborers were assured through the efforts of organizations, the first of which was the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society, formed in 1850, replaced by the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association in 1895.

The first contingent of foreign workers consisted of nearly 200 Chinese who arrived on the *Thetis* in 1852 and were distributed to plantations on three islands. They had five-year contracts at $3.00 monthly, including passage, food, and housing. Reaction to the Chinese workers was varied, despite the kingdom's experiences with Chinese who had come to Hawai'i before 1852 to work on the island of Kaua'i as entrepreneurs and technicians. A few planters characterized them as "quarrelsome, passionate and inclined to 'hang together.'" Others found them to be "industrious, skillful and thorough, and one Coolie in the field is worth, in my opinion, three natives" (quoted from Beechert 1985:63).

Following the first shipment of Chinese, nearly four hundred thousand workers were brought to the Islands from Japan, Portugal, the Pacific Islands, Germany, the Philippines, Korea, Russia, Spain, Puerto Rico, and Norway between 1852 and 1932, in addition to the last six thousand Filipinos in the first six months of 1946, to take care of the rising production on an increased number of sugar plantations as well as to furnish workers for the rapid development of the pineapple industry.

Labor importation was affected by several factors, all of which were defined by the need to maintain sugar's profitability through expanded production.

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These factors included: (1) the Civil War with its lure of a bonanza, with the cessation of cane growing in the South; (2) the Reciprocity Treaty of 1876 and its renewal in 1887 with the United States whose *quid pro quo* for a protected, profitable Hawaiian sugar industry was the use of O'ahu's Pearl Harbor as a military base against "any European or Asiatic power" which could become "a standing menace to all the vital interests of the United States on our Pacific shores" (quoted from Beechert 1985:79); (3) the annexation of Hawai'i by the United States in 1898 after the overthrow in 1893 of Queen Lili'uokalani, Hawai'i's last monarch, which invalidated the Masters and Servants Act and the Penal Code; (4) the Chinese Exclusion Act of the 1880s; (5) the complaints of non-Asiatic groups about their displacement from work by Asian workers, a condition induced by specific legislation such as the McKinley Tariff Act of 1891 which eliminated Hawai'i's preferential treatment and which resulted in layoffs of sugar workers who then migrated to the large towns to look for work; and (6) the vicissitudes of capitalist development.

Hawai'i's annexation as a territory by the United States served as a rallying point for the American Federation of Labor to organize workers in various crafts. However, most of these unions were confined to white skilled workers, as they were in almost all American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions on the mainland United States. Many of the AFL unions decried the concept of contract labor but railed against the "menace" of "Oriental" workers while calling for a living wage and decent working conditions.

The sugar workers, on the other hand, saw annexation as a means of rescinding their work contracts, and many individuals demanded return of their contracts from the employers' Action by workers before annexation consisted of their refusing to honor contracts or deserting their work places. Reports of the Chief Justice for the period 1876 through 1900 indicate there were more than forty-two thousand such cases on the civil calendar of the district courts of Hawai'i (compiled from data listed in Beechert 1985:48).

Working conditions may not have been as harsh as the worst plantations of the South during slavery, but there are innumerable reports of flogging, miserable living conditions, little medical care, rank discrimination, and long hours with little or no increase in compensation. There was also a lynching of a Japanese former contract worker by two field bosses (*luna*) and two white

shopkeepers in 1889 at Honoka'a (on the Island of Hawai'i) when he helped other Japanese contract workers.

## Labor Struggles After Annexation

Although there were instances of group action on sugar plantations before annexation (mainly by Chinese workers), following annexation there were more such occurrences, especially on the islands of Maui and O'ahu.

The culmination of these sporadic actions took place subsequently in 1909, 1920, 1924, and 1937, and were primarily uni-racial group strikes conducted by either the Japanese or Filipino workers.

The 1909 strike of Japanese workers on the island of O'ahu was basically the work of intellectuals who presented well-documented reasons for their demands for wage increases and improvement in living conditions. The strike was lost when the planters recruited Chinese, Hawaiians, and Portuguese as strike breakers.

The 1920 strike of more than twelve thousand sugar workers was notable for the organization of the Associated Japanese Labor Union by the workers, patterned after the AFL structure, and for the collaboration of Filipino Higher Wages Association, which was helped by the AFL Labor Council that called for labor unity. Despite the assistance of Japanese community organizations, the strike was lost. Strikers and their families were beset by evictions, deaths caused by the influenza epidemic, the lack of coordination between the Filipinos and the Japanese, and the lack of experience in running a work stoppage of such great magnitude.

The 1924 strike of five thousand Filipino workers, with sporadic action from island to island, climaxed at Hanapēpē (on the Island of Kaua'i) when 18 strikers and four policemen were killed in armed conflict. Its leader, convicted of subornation of perjury, was allowed to leave Hawai'i for California with a parole. The eight-month strike highlighted the intra-ethnic conflict between the Visayans, the first Filipino laborers to be imported from the southern part of the Philippines, and the Ilocanos, whose importation began in the 1920s from the northern part of the country. Employers made much of this ethnic division, which reinforced their stereotypes of the Visayans as flamboyant spendthrifts

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and the Ilocanos as hardworking and thrifty. This attitude is reminiscent of the intra-ethnic distinctions that were made between the Chinese Hakka and Punti, and the Japanese and Okinawan, and these groups' respective strengths and weaknesses.

The 1937 strike of sugar workers at the world's largest sugar plantation, Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Co. (on the Island of Maui), was conducted in part by the leader of the 1924 strike who returned to Hawai'i in 1932 after experiences with Filipino agricultural workers in California. This strike of fifteen hundred men was under the aegis of the Vibora Luviminda, a name derived from a Filipino patriot known as Vibora (serpent) and the contraction of three main island groups of the Philippines – Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao.

Although this was the last racial strike in the Islands, it was notable because it took place in a Hawai'i where unions had organized as a result of the NLRA and had received charters from mainland parent organizations. Thus, the strike attracted the attention of mainland organizations such as the Communist Party, one of whose organizers helped to conduct the strike, and the International Labor Defense, whose attorney came to defend 11 strike leaders charged with conspiracy to kidnap, terrorize, and hold a fellow worker who irrigated the cane. The attorney not only challenged the ethnic composition of the jurors but also addressed workers on their constitutional right to organize into unions.

In the period up to this last ethnic strike, employers used contract workers from different countries to counteract the complaints and job actions of dissidents. Following the 1920 strike of the Japanese, the sugar industry attempted to make changes in federal immigration laws and policies to allow the importation of Chinese workers. All characterizations of the different ethnic groups brought to Hawai'i are distilled in their being tabbed like cattle, whose importation is no different from the importation of other commodities.

Two other strikes – this time of seamen and longshoremen, one on the island of Hawai'i which ended in the so-called "Hilo Massacre" in August 1938 and the other conducted by longshoremen at both Ahukini and Port Allen on Kaua'i from 1940 to 1941 (a 10-month strike and the longest in Hawaiian labor history) – brought workers from all ethnic backgrounds together on the picket lines.

## Inter-Ethnic Cooperation Among Workers

During World War II, Hawai'i was ruled by martial law. Through a series of military orders, workers were frozen in their jobs and in their pay rates.

Workers, especially those on the sugar and pineapple plantations, were quick to see the discrimination against themselves compared to the so-called defense workers, most of whom were imported from the mainland. Although the majority of plantation workers were making far less than $1.00 hourly, they saw defense workers making much more than them, for the same kind of work.

Japanese workers suffered additional discrimination. In addition to Executive Order 9066, which removed more than a hundred thousand Japanese citizens and non-citizens from the West Coast and Hawai'i to relocation camps, these workers could not be employed on the waterfront or on other defense installations.

When the ILWU in San Francisco was asked by Hawai'i's Longshore Local for help in organizing sugar workers, the ground was laid for the rapid sign-up of workers on all plantations (but one) to join one big industrial union with no criteria for membership.

Sugar planters segregated imported workers, single and married, into ethnic camps. This segregation has been variously interpreted – as a device to keep ethnic groups from fraternizing and discussing mutual employment problems, or as the need to give workers and families the chance to be with like individuals in a hostile environment.

For whatever the original reasons for segregation, the result was salutary. It offered workers and families the chance to retain their cultural identities – religion, language, and family ties. It also gave ethnic groups the opportunity to develop social organizations which endowed them with a group identity for mutual benefit. These were the *tanamoshi* and *kumiai* (lending and credit coops) of the Japanese; the *tong* for the Chinese; and the *barrio* and city identification of the Filipino.

Segregated camps made organizing much easier for the ILWU. Natural leaders were identified and supplied with union cards. Similar leaders were identified in work gangs and supplied with union cards. Within a few weeks, recognition was gained for the various locals of the ILWU, and a first collective bargaining contract was signed with the industry in 1945.

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The 1946 sugar strike was the first industry-wide strike conducted in Hawai'i. On September 1, 1946, twenty-eight thousand sugar workers at 33 plantations struck. All told, about eighty-five thousand men, women, and children were affected by that strike.

Individuals and families were fed in soup kitchens with donated goods and the harvest of fishing and hunting committees. Almost all strikers served on committees designed to keep up morale, communicate with each other, work with community groups for support, man the picket lines, and to keep the children in school.

For the first time in the history of the labor movement, it was possible to win a strike with all the workers participating, regardless of ethnicity, job classification, or gender.

It is interesting to note that there was concern expressed on whether the large contingent of the six thousand Filipino workers who arrived in early 1946 and were assigned to sugar plantations would go on strike in light of the fact that many leaders of the strike were of Japanese ancestry. The answer of the newly arrived Filipino workers was: "We spent the last four years in the hills of our country, eating whatever we could dig up or catch. We can go through a lot more time without much food because we know what we are doing is right."

The second industry-wide strike was the longshore strike which began on May 1, 1949, when more than three thousand longshoremen struck all the ports in the territory. This strike was the crucible for Hawai'i's workers. It occurred at the dawn of the cold war. As with the sugar workers, longshoremen and their families were fed in soup kitchens and organized themselves into strike committees, but with the added chore of making contacts with creditors so they would not be evicted for non-payment of rent. Unlike the sugar workers who lived in company-provided houses (the industry agreed not to evict any sugar worker during the 1946 strike), longshoremen did not have that luxury.

Almost the entire community was against the striking longshoremen. Much of the press indulged in the wildest red-baiting. Women were organized into a broom brigade, which picketed union headquarters on a daily basis. Stories of dying chickens and ducks for lack of feed were prominently featured in the press. Tie-ins with Moscow were intimated in a series of "Dear Joe" letters in the morning daily. The reference was to Joseph Stalin.

When the strike was won in 157 days, the success of labor organizing was insured. Despite the virulent opposition, the workers themselves learned that only a union of an industrial nature with membership open to anyone, could be successful – meaning in this case, parity of wages and working conditions with their counterparts on the West Coast.

What came out of the two industry-wide strikes were the following: (1) workers could take control over their working lives; (2) workers became capable of conducting work stoppages, especially when all workers and their families were involved; and (3) workers exercised leadership and ran their own organizations without outside dictation.

## Where Will We Go From Here?

Race relations in Hawai'i are affected by many other questions, some of which will be raised here. The end of the chapter on the rebirth of the movement for sovereignty is still in the offing, with many problems to be solved, including the acceptance by the rest of the population of sovereignty and its results.

The nature of immigration will determine the configuration of ethnic groups in Hawai'i. Will the concept of reuniting families which primarily affects Asian countries, with the exception of Japan, change the nature of Hawaiian politics, and, therefore, the direction of the political economy?

Will Hawai'i continue to be a state where no one ethnic group is the majority? If that is the case, will Hawai'i continue race relations without the explosive quality which characterizes relations in some areas of the continental United States? Instead, will there be a subtlety to what some have said is a society which does discriminate against certain ethnic groups?

Can we find answers in the cases which have been filed with government agencies on race discrimination? Does the fact that Hawai'i is still an affirmative action state mean that the state will continue to be free from the more obvious discrimination that occurs in other areas?

Can the labor movement continue to be a force to mediate cases of discrimination, or must it make basic changes in structure and philosophy to insure that all workers are treated equally? What are the factors in the

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continued growth of worldwide capitalist development that might divide workers along racial lines?

The future is not clear; the present is uncertain; and the past has only limited answers to the problems we shall be facing in the next millennium.❖

## Reference

Beechert, Edward D. 1985. *Working in Hawaii. A Labor History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.