

The struggle of Chinese Americans

In celebrating Labor Day, the United States honours the struggle for decent working conditions. The nation is also engaged in a bout of apologies for past abuses of workers and immigrants.

However, it is a cruel irony that a nation apologising for past abuses is currently perpetrating new ones.

As the United States observes Labour Day this year on September 7, apologies for labour abuses, anti-labour violence, and slavery are flowing in from states such as Maryland, Virginia, Florida, North Carolina, California and New Jersey. At the federal level, the US Senate has also recently apologised for slavery. For instance, California has passed a resolution "deeply regretting" 150 years of violence against Chinese Americans. Adding to the momentum for recognition and regret, in late August 2009, California Assemblymen Mike Eng and Kevin de Leon called for a "Day of Inclusion" to mark December 17, 1943. On that day, the United States finally repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. It was the first US law that banned immigration by race. It also prohibited Chinese women from entering the country, a gesture toward ethnic cleansing that sought to eliminate a Chinese American population. Even so, the repeal set a paltry quota of 105 Chinese who could enter the United States each year.

At the national level, in 2005 the US Senate apologised for the 1931 Repatriation Program that shipped two million "temporary" workers to Mexico - one million of whom had been born in the United States. Importantly, Eng's bill in California also honours the "contributions of all immigrants to the greatness of the United States and to California." State apologies should also mark the untold forceful resistance of early immigrant labourers who did not await apologies to claim their rights - a compelling contribution to the American labour movement. While some struggles of immigrant workers - such as the "Bread and Roses" textile workers strike of 1912 in Massachusetts - are well-known, how many know that the organisers of the first farm worker strikes in California were Chinese?

Chinese immigrants also organised California's first general strike. In 1892, in the largest mass civil disobedience to date, 110,000 Chinese workers refused to wear photo identity cards. Chinese launderers and "washmen" went to jail rather than obey inane local "laundry ordinances" that banned laundries built of wood. When they were facing brutal expulsion by vigilantes, the Chinese returned laundry folded but still dirty.

They refused to deliver fresh fruits and vegetables to hotel owners and housewives who joined anti-Chinese leagues. But which school teaches that early Chinese American railroad workers struck for equal pay and for the right to have Chinese cooks boil tea water to keep them from the killer parasites that decimated white railroad workers who drank from the crowded mountain streams? However, such apologies will only have an impact if they help us remember these abuses. They should build support for the cause of legalising the presence of millions of undocumented workers living in the United States now.

Yet as the United States observed Labour Day, it is sad to report that Homeland Security officials were rounding up thousands of immigrants and holding them in detention centres while their children waited to be picked up at school. The apologies should go beyond contrition: they should pledge that the forced expulsion of immigrant labourers will cease. Despite contrition for past wrongs, violence against immigrant workers endures.

The popular "Hazleton code," designed by a mayor in a little town in Pennsylvania, makes it illegal for landlords to rent to alleged undocumented immigrants, although landlords have no way to verify documents - and law suits against this code have been filed by civil rights groups. Furthermore, driven by racial profiling, counties across the United States have banned day labour centres. In short, the government is emptying towns of immigrants and hurting local economies.

Though California's action is a good start, psychiatrist Aaron Lazere suggests that state apologies - usually offered hundreds of years after the fact by men who did not perpetrate the violence - should announce that the assaults were not the victims' fault. They should also guarantee the future safety of the victims, penalise the offenders and pay reparations. Victims, he says, should see the offenders suffer.

Viewed in that light, an apology for anti-Chinese violence should recall the purges from 1850 to 1906 that drove thousands of Chinese miners, fishermen, launderers, prostitutes, railroad workers and cooks from 300 towns across the Pacific Northwest. It should also recall the years Chinese emigres spent imprisoned at Angel Island waiting to enter the United States.

Why not have a Day of Inclusion that recalls the hundreds of thousands of dollars Chinese gold miners paid under the Foreign Miners Tax - providing half of California's revenue during the Gold Rush years? A Day of Inclusion should recall the farms, fishing boats, vegetable gardens and the segregated Chinatowns lost in the 19th century pogroms that travelled from Seattle to Riverside.

It should also recall the fact that Chinese workers were forced out of town, often at gun point - sometimes in 24 hours, sometimes in just four. In Los Angeles in 1871, 19 Chinese workers were lynched in one horrifying night. To be sure, these symbolic gestures are not to be underestimated. For example, they can teach the hidden history of Chinese Americans. After all, Asians still encounter stereotypes of passivity and docility that invite abuse.

In the first week of September 2009, New York State Gov. David Paterson struck the term "Oriental" from all state documents, joining then Gov. (now Secretary of Commerce) Gary Locke of Washington State in a gesture that removed an imprecise and derogatory term for inexplicable difference. "Oriental" is an old but divisive term that has long suggested enduring Asian "otherness." This act reflects the power of language to segregate and demean. Yet, how many Chinese Americans and Mexican Americans are aware of these state apologies?

Are these apologies true acts of accountability? Has an apology ever improved an under-funded school? And what of economic reparations for lost generations, lost lands, unpaid labour? They have not provided 40 acres of land to descendants of slaves. But one humble question can be asked, "Where's my mule?"

Jean Pfaelzer, author of "Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans" (2009) discussed this very volatile issue in amazing details.