In celebrating Labor Day, the United States honors the struggle for honorable working conditions. In this two-part series, Jean Pfaelzer — author of “Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans” — discusses the cruel irony of a nation apologizing for past immigrant abuses at the same time as it perpetuates new ones.

As the United States observes Labor Day this year on September 7, apologies for labor abuses, anti-labor violence, and slavery are flowing in from states like Maryland, Virginia, Florida, North Carolina, California and New Jersey. On a national level, the U.S. Senate has also just apologized for slavery.

"Tis the season to apologize

For instance, California has passed a resolution "deeply regretting" 150 years of violence against Chinese Americans. Adding to the momentum for recognition, 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On that day, the United States finally repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.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 U.S. 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.

The U.S. Senate has apologized for the 1931 Repatriation Program that shipped two million "temporary" workers to Mexico — one million of whom had been born in the United States.

The state apologies we are now witnessing should go beyond contrition. They should pledge that the forced expulsion of immigrant labor will cease. Despite contrition, local and national 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 laws suits against this code have been filed by civil rights groups.

Furthermore, driven by racial profiling, counties across the United States have banned day labor activity. In short, the government is evicting towns of immigrants and hurting local economies.

How to apologize

Though California's action is a good start, state-level apologies should clearly go beyond mere contrition. They should pledge that the forced expulsion of immigrant labor will cease. Looking at public acts of contrition, 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' "deeds, but the deeds of the aggressors, who should face justice, 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, laundries, porters, tubers, rail workers and cooks from 305 towns across the Pacific Northwest. It should also recall the years Chinese émigrés 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? Or a Day of fishing boats, vegetable gardens and the segregated Chinatowns lost in the 19th century pogroms that traveled across the United States.

It should also recall the fact that Chinese workers were forced out of town, often at gunpoint — sometimes in 24 hours, sometimes just in four. In Los Angeles in 1871, 19 Chinese workers were lynched in one horrifying night.

Real accountability? Real change?

To be sure, these symbolic gestures are not to be underestimated. For example, they can teach the hidden history of Chinese labor. After all, Asian Americans will encounter stereotypes of passivity and docility that invite abuse.

Are these apologies true acts of accountability? Has an apology ever improved an underfunded school? And what of economic reparations for lost generations, lost lands, unpaid labor? They have not provided any acres of land to descendants of slaves. As one friend asked, "Where's my mule?"

By Jean Pfaelzer | Monday, September 07, 2009