

Chinatown Goes Picketing (1938)

Lim P. Lee

Although China did not formally declare war against Japan until 1937, the War of Resistance informally began in 1931 after Japan attacked Mukden and occupied northeastern China. Almost immediately, Chinese Americans across the country put aside their differences and did what they could to help save China. During the next fourteen years of war in China, they donated their hard-earned savings, boycotted Japanese products, participated in protest parades and rallies, and supported the training of Chinese American pilots for the Chinese air force.

Written by social worker Lim P. Lee for the Chinese Digest,¹ the following detailed account of a successful picket protesting the shipping of scrap iron to Japan provides insight into the Chinese community's patriotic fervor and united stance on behalf of the war effort in China. Everyone—young and old, men and women, the political right and left, Christian and secular groups—participated. Highly organized and determined to make their point, the pickets succeeded in gaining the support of the long-shoremen and calling national attention to the need for an embargo of war materials to Japan.

San Francisco's waterfront has been the scene of many labor wars but it was only last month that the Sino-Japanese war was carried to its Embarcadero. The "zero hour" was 11 A.M., Dec. 16, and the "strategic withdrawal" was 2 P.M., Dec. 20, 1938, and what *did* happen has attracted nation-wide attention and is a story worth re-telling.

By the "grapevine method"—the most effective [form of] communication

1. A social worker, journalist, and later postmaster of San Francisco, Lim P. Lee (1910–2002) wrote about social issues in the Chinese American community through his "Sociological Data" page in the *Chinese Digest*, a newspaper intended for second-generation Chinese Americans that was published from 1935 to 1940.



Chinese pickets at the San Francisco waterfront, 1938. (Courtesy of Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco)

in Chinatown—Chinatownians heard that “something will happen” at the waterfront on Dec. 16, and all interested in picket duty for the good of China were to meet at 10:30 A.M. at the corner of Stockton and Clay streets. By 11:00 more than 200 volunteers answered the call to the colors. Singing, yelling, and cheering, they were carted down by trucks to Pier 45. There they were met by [European] Americans, Greeks, Jews, and other volunteers of many nationalities, 300 in number, 100 more than the Chinese forces. Lying on Pier 45 was a Greek tramp freighter, the *S. S. Spyros*, loading implements of death—scrap iron for the bombs of Japan! I. Bib Tolins, the director of the United Committee for the Boycott of Japanese Goods, held a short strategy meeting, and the demonstration was on!

Lieutenant Governor—elect Ellis Patterson of California, a true liberal and a statesman—if there ever was one—fired the opening gun, saying: “Speeches have been made, the press has denounced the shipment of war materials to Japan, all progressives have expressed themselves for democracy against the aggressor, but you are doing something about it! Congress is about to meet. . . . *Pressure your Congressmen*, that they must ask Congress to put through an embargo on aggressor nations and declare Japan to be an aggressor.”

When the American longshoremen started for lunch, the pickets very courteously but firmly pleaded, “Longshoremen, be with us! Longshoremen, be with us.” Smilingly and good-naturedly the pickets continued until 1:00 P.M., then asked among themselves: “Will the longshoremen return to

work?" A few did, but the majority of them honored the Chinese picket lines, and the few that worked were so ashamed that they dropped their hooks shortly and joined their comrades. "Victory! Victory!" the call was shouted through Chinatown and the pickets began to arrive in trucks, in street-cars, in automobiles. The radio and the press flashed the news to the nation:—Chinese pickets tied up scrap iron to Japan and American longshoremen refused to load implements of destruction! This lasted until 5 P.M.

By the time the news was flashed back to Chinatown, pigs were being roasted for the nourishment of the Chinese pickets and American sympathizers. Soda pop, coffee, hot tea, sandwiches, oranges, Chinese buns were streaming toward the waterfront to feed the pickets and the longshoremen. Chinese came in from Stockton and valley towns; they marched in from Palo Alto and Peninsula cities; and thousands poured in from the Bay Area till the climax of the picketing numbered 5,000 strong and more!

Then an ultimatum was issued to the pickets on Dec. 19, at 12:00 noon. The committee of the United Chinese Societies met with the representatives of the Waterfront Employers' Association, and the labor relations committee of the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union, Local 1-10, met with the same representatives of the shipowners, and through their president, Mr. Almon E. Roth, the ultimatum was issued: the Chinese must remove the picket lines, the longshoremen must go back to work, or the shipping of San Francisco and the West Coast would be tied up as a consequence of the failure to accept the dictate of the Waterfront Employers' Association. However, Mr. Roth expressed "personal sympathies" for China, but as a business principle, commerce in San Francisco cannot be interrupted. (Even such commerce that goes to Japan to become bombs to be rained on innocent Chinese civilians, women, and children must go on as a matter of "business principle.")

The longshoremen met the same evening, and Mr. B. S. Fong, president of the China War Relief Association of America and chairman of the committee representing the United Chinese Societies, pleaded with the longshoremen to respect the picket lines. Dr. Le Shan Peng, secretary of the National Committee of China's YMCA and director of Hankow's six refugee camps, gave an impassioned plea for the longshoremen to stand by China. After the Chinese representatives left, the longshoremen voted not to cross the picket lines even if there were one Chinese picket on duty. However, they instructed their officials to negotiate with the Chinese for an amicable solution but specifically told their officials "not to let the Chinese down."

The emergency council of the United Chinese Societies was summoned for a night session, and a committee of eleven was empowered to negotiate with the longshoremen for an "amicable solution." The committee met with the officials of the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union at 12 noon on Dec. 20. Mr. Henry Schmidt, spokesman for the longshore-

men, told the Chinese representatives that the C.I.O. Council had passed a resolution to instruct the secretary to call all labor, fraternal, civilian and religious organizations for a coastwide conference to study and promote the embargo on all materials to Japan. Thus the demonstration the Chinese staged has served the purpose of calling the attention of the American public to the seriousness of the embargo question, and that the conference should be called immediately. The picketing of the S. S. *Spyros* was borne solely by the longshoremen, and they had voted to stand by the Chinese as long as they continued picketing in spite of the threat of the closing of the San Francisco port and the tie-up of West Coast shipping. But the more important issue was to get the American people to act together, and that the longshoremen pledged to do.

Mr. B. S. Fong spoke for the Chinese committee, expressing the heartfelt thanks of the Chinese people to the longshoremen in honoring the picket lines. The wages that the longshoremen lost far exceeded in value the cargo that could be lost by the shipowners, but the Chinese people had found out who their true friends were. The Chinese pickets were withdrawn at 2 P.M. Dec. 20, and marched en masse to the Waterfront Employers' Association and protested their mercenary action. Then they circled to the longshoremen's headquarters to express the appreciation of the Chinese people. Thus ended the Sino-Japanese war on San Francisco's waterfront. Then 5,000 marched in a mile-long parade through downtown San Francisco and back to Chinatown, where a mass meeting was held and a national campaign for an embargo on war materials for Japan was launched!

SOURCE: *Chinese Digest*, January 1939, pp. 10-11.

OTHER REFERENCES

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