

## ✓ 9. Labor Leader Karl Yoneda Recalls Japanese Interethnic Organizing (1930s), 1978

I decided to join and volunteered to be an organizer for the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee of Southern California (AWOCSC) established by the Los Angeles Japanese Labor Association in the spring of 1927; also on May 1st became a member of the Communist Party using the name Karl Hama, in both organizations. All organizers were either Issei (Japan born) or Kibei (U.S. born but raised in Japan). We signed up over a thousand workers among Mexican, Filipino and Japanese strawberry, tomato and bean pickers and conducted strikes for 25 to 35 cents pay and union recognition. . . .

We found during organizing drives that Japanese were last to sign-up, in contrast to quick responses from Mexican and Filipino laborers. Our successes filled us with enthusiasm, though we realized that more Japanese were behind picket lines—in other words scabbing where strikes occurred. AWOCSC efforts continued till 1929, when the militant Agricultural Workers Industrial Union of the Trade Union Unity League (AWIU-TUUL) emerged in California taking in all farm workers regardless of race, color, creed or nationality. Its membership switched to the new union, later Japanese Sections were established to meet the need for Japanese language material.

Imperial Valley, one of California's most fertile areas, had over 10,000 farm workers—7,000 Mexicans, 1,000 Japanese, several hundred Filipinos and 1,000 others—employed there in 1930. In January the AWIU sent ten organizers, including

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Tetsuji Horiuchi, Issei, and Danny Roxas, Filipino, in the valley to start the union. They raised five demands:

- 25 cents per hour pay; Doing away with all labor contractors;
- Elimination of piecework; Improvement of labor camps;
- Recognition of camp (union) committees,

at the same time appealing to workers to walk off if growers rejected them, which many did but once again most of these were from small farms.

However, 400 members of the all white AFL shed workers took advantage of the strike situation and shut down a packing house after their demands of \$1.00 per hour for lettuce packers and 75 cents for trimmers were turned down. . . .

Seventeen million unemployed were looking for jobs and food during the massive U.S. economic crisis which began in 1929. The Socialist Party had collapsed ideologically many years before, the IWW was no longer an active force, AFL leaders were collaborating with employers by betraying those who dared to strike and [were] not interested in the unemployed. The Communist Party was the only organization which helped to establish National Unemployed Council branches encompassing unemployed workers from all industries. . . .

In '31 and '32, due to prevailing unbearable working conditions such as low pay, long hours, indiscriminate firing and poor housing on California farms where only Japanese were hired, more than 20 strikes, led by the AWIU Japanese Section, were conducted in Chico, Lodi, Walnut Grove, Fresno, Visalia, Bakersfield down to Stanton and San Gabriel Valley among strawberry, raspberry, pea, peach, asparagus, grape and lettuce pickers. Significantly, these strikes were always supported by their fellow union members who helped "man" the picket lines, strike kitchens, etc. . . .

AWIU Japanese Sections in Sacramento, Stockton and Los Angeles acted as coordinators of union activities between all farm workers. During 1933, more than 15 AWIU strikes were recorded. In a round figure there were 35,000 Mexican, Filipino, Japanese, Negro, white, small number of Korean and East Indian participants. Over 100 strike leaders were arrested; among them were a Korean and five Kibei organizers. At the Martin Ranch in Visalia, where 250 Japanese grape pickers went on strike for higher pay. I, along with the Korean and seven others, were picked up by a dozen or so deputies and told by the sheriff "Get out of town or go to jail."