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Yakima Raids Project for the National Week of Action

WAIRJ

Building political power for immigrants and refugees

Organizing's New Arrival

by Maya Muir

In the Seattle school district, students from immigrant backgrounds who speak any one of over 100 different languages are threatened by an attack on bilingual education. In northern Nevada, Latino immigrants from countries where open political affiliation could result in repression often avoid electoral politics even after becoming U.S. citizens. Throughout the West, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) selectively raids Latino communities, creating a climate of fear and often splitting families and communities apart.

These are only some of the problems faced by immigrants and refugees today in the western states, in a political climate in which the Right, nationally, is whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment as one of their prime organizing tools, particularly against people of color. (See related stories on pages 10 & 11)

Immigrant and refugee communities are organizing against the attacks. In the West, some of the most exciting resistance is being led by three young community-based organizations, themselves led by women of color from immigrant families: in Seattle, the Washington Alliance for Immigrant and Refugee Justice (WAIRJ) and the Asian Pacific American Coalition for Equity, and in northern Nevada, Latinos for Political Education (LAPE).

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Immigrant & Refugee Organizing

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The Washington Alliance for Immigrant and Refugee Justice

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refugee rights in Washington State. NWIRP hired Soya Jung to coordinate and develop the new organization. Jung, whose family immigrated from Korea in the 60s, had previously worked for the Washington State Democratic Caucus and as a reporter for the *International Examiner*, an Asian-American newspaper in Seattle.

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established," says Jung. "Three major laws — the Anti-terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act in April, the federal welfare law in August, and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act in September — threw out all the rules for immigrants, replacing them with incredibly harsh provisions."

The 1996 federal welfare law eliminated food stamps and disability benefits for over 1 million immigrants and refugees nationwide. In fact, over 40 percent of welfare cuts were from immigrants, regardless of "legal" status, who only made up five percent of welfare recipients. WAIRJ worked hard to secure replacement programs in Washington state — and succeeded. Washington now has the most generous welfare policies for immigrants and refugees in the nation. However, access to welfare continues to be a focus for WAIRJ. "Although we've won back eligibility for critical programs, fear of being reported to the INS keeps many immigrants from getting the services they need — even if they're legally eligible," Jung explains. WAIRJ is now working to draw attention to the injustices of new immigrant reporting and verification requirements and other lesser-known provisions of the federal welfare law.

WAIRJ recently began examining changes in immigration law enforcement and detention provisions. "The 1996 laws created mandatory detention for more than 34 kinds of criminal convictions, many of them minor, even after people have already served their sentences. People who are being locked up include asylum seekers, undocumented workers and legal residents with green cards," says Jung, "and the law is retroactive." In addition, immigrant detainees no longer have access to judicial review, and are unable to argue their cases before a judge. "Nationally 16,000 people are being held, 11,000 in county jails. Many of these people can't be deported because we have poor diplomatic relations with their countries of origin, because the country is in turmoil, or because the country refuses to accept them. So, often what we're seeing is indefinite incarceration, not short-term detention. The INS calls them 'lifers.'" Who are these people? Nationally, Cubans make up the biggest sector, followed by Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians. "It's part of a culture of incarceration that disproportionately affects people of color in this country," says Jung.

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WAIRJ

Down on the farmworkers

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Through the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, WAIRJ also works with other organizations nationally, developing strategies to end immigration raids and related abuses. One fruit of this collaboration was a 1998 report by WAIRJ, titled, "*Civil Rights Under Siege*," detailing abuses and recommending changes in the law. WAIRJ released the report during the National Week of Action Against Immigration Raids last October, which was marked by press conferences, rallies and street theater in over 30 cities nationwide. WAIRJ also works on issues like the "guest worker" legislation being pushed by U.S. Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR). "Proponents of guest worker legislation say there's an agricultural labor shortage," says Jung, "but farmworkers tell us just the opposite, that they're vying for jobs, especially good jobs. The guest worker program is just a warmed-over version of the old Bracero program — a way to get more exploitable labor for big growers. Wyden and Rep. Slade Gorton [R - Wash.] are buddying up with agribusiness on this one." [See "*Migrant workers, minimum wage*," Spring 1998]



APACE members and supporters

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The Asian Pacific American Coalition for Equality

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Immigrant & Refugee Organizing

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Asian-Pacific Islander communities into the future. Also, three APACE board members have been asked by Governor Gary Locke to be part of a team charged with figuring out how to retain maximum diversity as I-200 is implemented.

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Specifically, the Coalition decided to work to preserve bilingual education and fight attempts to institute “English-only” measures, as well as to work in relevant electoral campaigns.

In 1998, APACE sponsored an “Asian Pacific Islander Legislative Day,” an annual event organized by the Asian Pacific Islander Coalition (APIC), which formed in response to federal welfare reform that drew about 2,000 new immigrants and citizens in caravans from around the state. “It was very inter-genera-

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The Immigrant Rights Struggle: a Battle Against White Nationalism

By Soya Jung

“The American nation has always had a specific ethnic core. And that core has been white.”

— Peter Brimelow, Alien Nation, 1994

Recent attacks on immigrants have been rooted in divisive and misleading political rhetoric arguing that immigrants steal U.S. jobs, drain our nation’s resources, and even skew electoral politics. Today these arguments parade as progressive concerns — for low-wage workers, for welfare recipients, for the environment, even for the integrity of the U.S. political process.

In reality, behind these attacks is a right-wing, anti-immigrant movement that seeks to end non-European immigration in order to build a white America. Peter Brimelow, the editor of *Forbes* magazine and a leader in the anti-immigrant movement, argues for changes in immigration law to “reopen the scuttles on the European side and start to shift the ethnic balance back.” While his rhetoric may sound extreme, anti-immigrant think tanks have crafted an arsenal of arguments for mainstream use that sound anti-poverty and pro-environment.

The truth is that immigrants do not leverage enough power to be responsible for the problems of poverty and environmental degradation. That is the domain of border-jumping multinational corporations. However, immigrants have long enriched our nation economically, culturally and politically. And today, as the scapegoats *du jour*, they are poised to battle a dangerous form of white nationalism that tests not only the U.S. tenets of fairness and democracy, but also international human rights doctrine.

WAIRJ and other immigrant-rights groups across the United States are building a grassroots base — organizing farm workers and their families, friends and families of immigrant detainees, and immigrant welfare recipients — to challenge the myths and racism driving anti-immigrant policies. In addition, more and more immigrant-rights advocates are forging alliances with anti-poverty, civil rights, and police accountability groups with the goal of raising public awareness of the contradictions between repressive U.S. policies and international human rights doctrine.

Amid the rollback of civil rights in the United States, the emergence of white nationalism, and the 50th anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the struggle for immigrant rights must embrace a standard of justice that transcends borders.

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Tran-Thien knows the immigrant experience personally. She came to this country from Vietnam in 1978, at the age of four. "My first political job as a child was stirring rice paste to stick letters onto picket signs for my father who is a social worker and was very involved," she says. Tran-Thien became involved when, as a student at Seattle Central Community College, she heard about Initiative 200.

In February 1999, APACE again sponsored an "Asian Pacific Islander Legislative Day," which focused on Initiative 200 and preserving bilingual education. It is another example of the proactive approach Mary Tran-Thien hopes will characterize APACE's work in the future.

Nevada's Latinos for Political Education

In 1994, when Latina candidate Emma Sepulveda ran for the Nevada Senate from the northern part of the state, many progressive whites and Latinos came together to support her candidacy. Sepulveda lost, but, says Bob Fulkerson of the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN) who worked on her campaign, "It seemed like a shame not to continue to build on the organizing we had done to increase the political participation of Latinos here." With help from PLAN and Western States Center, Latinos for Political Education (LAPE) was founded.

"At that time, there was no political organization and little awareness in the community, says LAPE director Rosa Molina. "Without that, it was very difficult for Latinos to get elected."

Now LAPE makes sure that all new Latino citizens in the state are educated about their rights in the U.S. political process. "At the naturalization ceremonies here, we give a speech about why new citizens must get involved in all levels of the political process, down to the schools," says Molina. "And then we register them as voters."

To really get these new citizens involved often requires breaking down more barriers than just low voter registration. "These people come from many different countries," says Molina. "They often don't believe in elections,



or they come from countries where there is retaliation for belonging to a political party. Or maybe they've just seen such corruption that they don't trust any politicians."

"We have to educate them to get them involved," says Molina. Education is something she knows about. Molina was a schoolteacher and organizer of the teachers' union in her native El Salvador during the worst of the political repression. "I had a bad experience there," Molina says, so she came to the U.S., to northern Nevada. "Education is still my main goal," she says.

LAPE's educational program is bearing fruit. Latinos are beginning to come forward, interested in running for more political positions, and LAPE will likely teach them some of the skills they need to run.

With the Latino population of northern Nevada now grown to around 20 percent, LAPE's work is having a significant impact on progressive politics in the region. "Out of 800 people LAPE registered to vote in 1996, 55 percent of them voted. Before the last election, they had registered several thousand," says Bob Fulkerson. "We are checking now to see how many voted."

Nationally the anti-immigrant tide — backed by the Right from the Klan to Congressional delegates — is powerful and spawning a multitude of specific attacks, including INS repression, welfare cuts, and restrictive ballot measures. Yet as the attacks grow, the threatened communities are giving birth to dynamic organizations such as APACE, WAIRJ, and LAPE, which are responding creatively and proactively to the threats and strengthening the voice of immigrants and people of color in the West.

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