



Filipinos in the Canneries: Creating Ethnic Unity to Break the Contract System and Colonial Power

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About the Author

Katie Hall is a graduating senior majoring in history at the University of Washington. She enjoys the opportunities to engage with the past and to build critical analytical skills that history provides students. She is a first-generation college student and will be the first in her family to earn a bachelor's degree. In fall 2011 she will begin law school, pursuing a career in health law and health policy. In 2010 she received the Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity (OMA&D)/Ethnic Cultural Center Leadership Award for her work as president of the Minority Association of Pre-health Students, a group geared towards eliminating disparities in the healthcare professions and towards illuminating the health issues of the disadvantaged. She has served as a student representative on the OMA&D Student Advisory Board and on the Office of Multicultural Affairs' Diversity Advisory Board at the UW School of Medicine. Katie enjoys the outdoors, singing, and spending time with her friends and family. She is currently a Faye Wilson Scholar in the History Department.

Abstract

A crucial aspect of Seattle's labor history lies in the story of Asian and Asian American workers who were arguably one of the most oppressed and exploited groups within Washington's labor industry. This study illuminates this part of Seattle's labor history and focuses on the leading role of Filipinos and Filipino Americans in formulating the Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union (CWFLU). The CWFLU's methods of unionism both recognized and challenged ethnic divides in the canneries, effectively undermining efforts to perpetually subjugate Asian and Asian American workers. These methods helped formulate a Filipino nationalist identity that allowed Filipinos to distance themselves from the oppressive confines of the "colonial" label. This study incorporates analysis of and findings from the CWFLU Local 7 records, immigration policies such as the Exclusion Acts of 1882 and 1924, and secondary research on the labor, immigration, and social history and structure of the Pacific Northwest. This method allows for an incorporation of the historical framework that led to the



subjugation of Asian and Asian American workers and showcases how Filipino's actions in the 1930s were such a pioneering move. Racial tensions were created by oppressive labor and immigration structures. Furthermore, it reveals that the Filipino leaders of the CWFLU utilized these oppressive measures and tensions as a foundation for recruitment to form a unified front that put Asians and Asian Americans in control of their own jobs and economic opportunities within the canneries. This study provides important insight into a little researched aspect of Seattle's labor history, thus providing a more complete picture of this historical moment. Furthermore, it demonstrates how radical labor unionism was utilized by Filipinos as a way to break free from their ambiguous and oppressed stances in America.

A very crucial aspect of Seattle's labor history lies within the story of Asian and Asian American workers who were arguably one of the most oppressed and exploited groups within Washington's labor industry. This study illuminates this part of Seattle's labor history and focuses on the leading role of Filipinos and Filipino Americans in formulating the Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union (CWFLU). The CWFLU's methods of unionism both recognized and challenged ethnic divides in the canneries, effectively undermining efforts to perpetually subjugate Asian and Asian American workers. These methods helped formulate a Filipino nationalist identity that allowed Filipinos to distance themselves from the oppressive confines of the "colonial" label. Analysis of findings from the CWFLU Local 7 records, immigration policies such as the Exclusion Acts of 1882 and 1924, and secondary research on the labor, immigration, and social history and structure of the Pacific Northwest allows for an incorporation of the historical framework that led to the subjugation of Asian and Asian American workers and showcases how Filipinos' actions in the 1930s

were such a pioneering move. Racial tensions were created by oppressive labor and immigration structures. Furthermore, the Filipino leaders of the CWFLU utilized these oppressive measures and tensions as a foundation for recruitment to form a unified front that put Asians and Asian Americans in control of their own jobs and economic opportunities within the canneries. This study provides important insight into a little researched aspect of Seattle's labor history, thus providing a more complete picture of this historical moment, and it demonstrates how radical labor unionism was utilized by Filipinos as a way to break free from their ambiguous and oppressed stances in America.

The expansion of Washington State was carried largely on the backs of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino immigrants who were recruited to fill the jobs undesired by European Americans. They were exploited and unwelcomed, and social barriers limited their mobility within the labor market. Although Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos shared these experiences, their tentative positions within the labor market created ethnic tensions. Labor



contractors and business owners benefitted from upholding these tensions, as it kept a large cache of cheap workers available that would maximize profits. This tension was prominent in Washington's salmon-canneries.

During the 1930s, Filipino cannery workers broke through the tension within the industry. Filipinos' status as U.S. "nationals" allowed them to immigrate freely into the U.S. and to gain a strong presence in the canneries. Recognizing the need for radical reform of the contract system, Filipino laborers formed the Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union (CWFLU) in Seattle. While the stated goals of the CWFLU promoted the needs of all laborers, the union in its early years was clearly ethnocentric. The history of tension within the canneries contributed to this development. Furthermore, the relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines left Filipinos struggling between two identities, the "colonial" and the "immigrant," that further separated them from the Chinese and Japanese workers. Originally affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the relationship between the two grew bitter as the AFL became an extension of oppression and ethnic division. By forming a pan-Asian consciousness that both recognized and challenged ethnic divides in the canneries, the CWFLU both undermined efforts to perpetually subjugate Asian workers and also helped formulate a Filipino nationalist identity that allowed Filipinos to distance themselves from the oppressive confines of the "colonial" label.

The ways in which Washington grew became an important factor in the treatment of Asians as workers. The settlement of

Washington was the result of the arrival of the railroad in the nineteenth century, which quickly became the symbol of the "wage earners' frontier."¹ This title was attributed largely to the economic opportunities in the Pacific Northwest. Washington, with its abundance of natural resources, presented extractive capitalism to settlers. Resources were viewed by many as an infinite source of wealth and the railroads facilitated the immigration necessary to develop extractive industry to its maximum economic potential. The railroads also marked the start of the exploitation of Asian immigrants in the region. Chinese were recruited to the U.S. to supply cheap labor for expanding railroad lines. As more Chinese immigrated into the region they began to occupy more of the labor market, working jobs not only in the railroad, but also the mines, lumberyards, domestic services, and eventually the salmon-canneries.²

During the late nineteenth century the salmon-canneries became vital to the region's growth. This importance did not translate into a desire by European Americans to occupy cannery jobs because the majority of the jobs involved hard labor and poor working conditions. These jobs entailed: unloading and moving large salmon, butchering and eviscerating the salmon, hand packing cans, soldering tin cans, and cooking salmon.³ The

¹ Kristofer Allerfeldt, *Race, Radicalism, Religion, and Restriction: immigration in the Pacific Northwest, 1890-1924* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), p. 17.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

³ Chris Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor: The Pacific Coast Canned-Salmon Industry, 1870-1942* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), pp. 25-37.



cannery environment required workers to perform their physically exhausting tasks while covered in and wading through entrails and water. Under these circumstances, it is clear why the European Americans distanced themselves from these jobs. Instead, they occupied higher tiered positions within the canneries, working as managers and supervisors. The European American workers were able to occupy these positions on account of their dominant presence in society. Their deterrence from the lower tier positions, however, left a gap that needed to be filled in order for the canneries to prosper.

The salmon-canneries became a primary outlet for the exploitation of Asian and Asian American workers. The precedent set by the railroad companies in Washington was influential and Chinese immigrants were quickly recruited into the canneries after their emergence in the 1860s. At the same time the U.S. as a whole was facing serious unemployment.⁴ Chinese settlers were accused of “stealing” American jobs, fueling anti-Chinese riots that devastated the Chinese population in Washington. This led to the Exclusion Act of 1882 that prohibited entry of Chinese labor and precluded the Chinese from citizenship. The Chinese returned as cheap labor to rebuild Seattle after its destructive fire in 1889. The Chinese population, however, was frozen due to oppressive social barriers. Most settlers were male and interracial marriage was discouraged as the Chinese were viewed as “racial contaminants” that threatened the white

⁴ Edward Burke and Elizabeth Burke, *Seattle's Other History: Our Asian-American Heritage* (The Profanity Hills Press, 1979), p. 10.

society.⁵ Unable to rebuild their population, the cheap labor supply the canneries depended on diminished. The Chinese immigrants had provided not only cheap and efficient labor, but a willingness to work in the canneries' unpleasant conditions. The combination increased profits for cannery owners and started a pattern of labor recruitment that would remain intact over the next sixty years.

Washington's cheap labor supply was soon replenished by Japanese immigrants, the first of whom began arriving in the 1880s. Due to the U.S. desire to trade with Japan, the Exclusion Act of 1882 aimed at the “Mongolian race” was not applied to Japanese immigrants.⁶ The Japanese proved to be efficient laborers willing to work the canneries, but their welcome was soon worn out. By 1900, Japanese made up the largest non-white ethnic group in Seattle and were viewed as direct competition for white workers.⁷ In 1907, Japan and the U.S. signed The Gentleman's Agreement, which limited the number of passports issued to Japanese citizens, effectively deterring immigrant workers.⁸ After this point, the Japanese progressed into self-employment via business ventures and agriculture.⁹ While the Japanese maintained a strong presence, their exclusion and economic ventures created a new void in the cannery industry.

⁵ Allerfeldt. *Race, Radicalism, Religion, and Restriction*, pp. 154-55.

⁶ Burke, *Seattle's Other History*, p. 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 160

⁸ Dorothy B. Fujita-Rony, *American Workers, Colonial Power: Philippine Seattle And The Transpacific West, 1919-1941* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), p. 88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.



The wave of Filipino immigration that occurred in the early twentieth century helped fill this new void. After the U.S. colonial conquest of the Philippines in 1899 Filipinos were given U.S. “national” status and were able to immigrate freely to America.¹⁰ Filipinos quickly became the largest non-white ethnic group in Seattle. Similarly to their Chinese and Japanese predecessors, Filipinos became efficient and cheap cannery workers and became the largest ethnic group represented in the canneries by the 1930s. The Filipinos’ entrance into the canneries would mark the end of this oppressive cycle of labor recruitment of Asian and Asian Americans.

As the pattern of immigration suggests Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos in Washington had a shared experience. All three groups were recruited as cheap labor for Washington’s salmon-canning industry. All three groups were also similarly treated by the white community. Each was discouraged from interracial marriage and faced similar social barriers that limited where they lived and worked; all of these measures were a means to protect the stability of the dominant white society. Finally, all three were denied the right to become citizens.

Despite this shared experience the immigration restrictions and social barriers these Asian groups faced created a tension between them that peaked in the labor industry. This was largely due to competition and is exemplified by the recruitment system of the salmon-canneries. As these groups became restricted from immigration and faced riots, another group was readily available to replace their labor. By the 1930s exclusionary policies directed at Chinese

¹⁰ Burke, *Seattle’s Other History*, p. 15.

and Japanese immigrants had diminished their representation in the canneries. Filipinos’ larger presence in the general population correlated with a larger presence in the canneries. This cycle kept Asian immigrants in constant competition with one another within the canneries.

Labor contractors perpetuated this tension by creating strong racial divides via differential labor hiring and monopolization of recruitment. Due to the seasonal nature of the work, canneries “engendered a sense of impermanence among owners and workers that encouraged the use of migratory labor.”¹¹ This led to an increasing dependence on contractors to recruit and manage immigrant workers. Canneries required workers to fill the lower tier of jobs, a role initially filled by the Chinese. To maximize recruitment, cannery owners used Chinese middlemen as recruiters of their countrymen.¹² By the end of the 1880s Chinese contractors had created a hierarchy of hiring within the lower level of jobs. Despite diminishing numbers due to the 1882 Exclusion Act, the Chinese asserted their importance as much needed laborers and continued to thrive due to patronage from their Chinese contractors. At the turn of the century, cannery owners attempted to maximize profits by utilizing both mechanization and large sources of cheap labor, and the Japanese became a new focus of recruitment. Chinese workers nonetheless worked to maintain a “labor aristocracy” and did so by keeping secrets of the trade and through the reinvigoration of the contract system.¹³

¹¹ Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor*, p. 27.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 37-47.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-98.



Japanese workers were still able to gain a foothold in the industry by the 1910s through the establishment of their own ethnocentric contractors, creating ethnic competition for control of jobs in this tiered labor structure.¹⁴ Ethnic competition amongst Chinese and Japanese workers prevailed into the 1930s. This is the environment in which the Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union (CWFLU) emerged.

The CWFLU rose in 1933 in response to the continuing labor hierarchy that denied Filipino workers agency over themselves as laborers. Although Filipinos had come to represent the largest group of workers within the canneries, they were largely shut out of more specialized tasks due to their monopolization by Chinese and Japanese workers who were well represented through contractors.¹⁵ Filipino cannery workers, many of whom were male college students, felt the effects of this segregation strongly. The Great Depression had severely limited social mobility and Filipino students who had viewed higher education as an outlet for progress faced the realization that school was unaffordable.¹⁶ The Great Depression necessitated cannery work for these young men who could no longer afford school as there were few other occupations open to them due to social barriers placed on non-whites. While the Japanese and Chinese workers too felt the pressures of the Great Depression, they were well represented and favored by their contractors. This hierarchy encouraged Filipino

workers to challenge the system in order to gain mobility and benefits from one of the few remaining labor options they had left.

The atmosphere of racial tension within the canneries influenced the early goals of the CWFLU. Although the CWFLU's constitution states that "the membership of this Union shall be composed of all Cannery and Farm Laborers irrespective of nationality, color, creed, and religion," the union in its early years was focused on creating unity amongst Filipino workers.¹⁷ This may explain the reason why initially the union did not advocate for the end of the contract system. Rather, they fought for a separate entity within the contract system that would favor Filipino workers and allow them to move up into specialized ranks.¹⁸

The CWFLU's early position fit within the paradigm of their parent organization, the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The AFL was rather conservative and concentrated largely on immediate goals, such as higher wages, rather than social reformation.¹⁹ The philosophy of the AFL insisted that workers could gain benefits from the capitalist system using methods of the capitalists themselves.²⁰ Forming an organization across ethnic and class boundaries, therefore, did not fit into the AFL's operative paradigm. The CWFLU's demand for better representation for Filipinos did not require

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 137.

¹⁶ Fujita-Rony, *American Workers, Colonial Power*, pp. 71-72.

¹⁷ Organizational Features, Box 7/1 Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union Local 7 Records, Acc. 3927-1, University of Washington Libraries Special Collections.

¹⁸ Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor*, p. 140.

¹⁹ Sanford Cohen, *LABOR In The United States* (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1975), p. 64.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 66.



a major change in the structure of the canneries. Instead, it worked within the confines of the cannery system in order to claim economic benefits, such as access to specialized tasks. The CWFLU's emergence as a Filipino led and focused group that demanded economic and not political reform accommodated the AFL's stance on the labor issue.

The early years of the CWFLU proved rather unsuccessful in effecting beneficial change for Filipino laborers. The union had trouble recruiting members, partly because the CWFLU's demands entailed little change from the canneries' current labor structure. Poor membership compounded the CWFLU's inability to insert itself affirmatively into the contract system that was already so well established. In 1933 contractors, who refused to let the CWFLU assert itself as a recruitment entity, paid workers very low wages, and this increased the frustration of the Filipino laborers and further exaggerated the failure of the union.²¹ This lack of demonstrable accomplishment indicated to the CWFLU leaders that the contract system itself was in need of reform if Filipino laborers were ever going to assert more power in the canneries.

The CWFLU began targeting the contract system directly as early as 1934. During public hearings for the National Recovery Administration (NRA) in San Francisco that same year, CWFLU President Virgil Duyungan deplored the contract system for prejudicing against Filipino workers and targeted Japanese and Chinese contractors.²²

²¹ Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor*, p. 139.

²² Fujita-Rony, *American Workers, Colonial Power*, p. 185.

This was an important turning point in the CWFLU's approach to reform. This moment also marked the reinforcement of the union's ethnocentric focus. In his public defamation of cannery contractors, Duyungan failed to mention Filipino contractors who made up four of the eleven major contractors in Seattle.²³ The new shift in the CWFLU's approach became a turning point that forced changes in the CWFLU's ethnocentric approach that would eventually favor all workers.

Another prominent Asian Seattle leader, Clarence T. Arai, was present during the 1934 public NRA hearing. Arai was a Japanese lawyer and a major leader among the Seattle Japanese community who gained increasing influence among Japanese cannery workers after 1934.²⁴ Arai countered Duyungan's attack by arguing that the CWFLU was ethnocentric and corrupt, with no proof to show that it could or would effect change for all laborers.²⁵ He concluded that the CWFLU was fostering tension and called for all Japanese workers to join the Japanese Cannery Workers Association (JCWA) to find true representation for their labor needs. When the AFL began to back the JCWA, the CWFLU took this as a threat to its autonomy. This perceived threat helped CWFLU leaders recognize the true inhibitors of labor mobility and equality.

As a result of the AFL's interference in union efforts, the CWFLU began to recognize

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

²⁴ Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor*, p. 161.

²⁵ Minutes of a Special meeting of Japanese Group Feb. 11, 1937, Box ¼ Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union Local 7 Records, Acc. 3927-1, University of Washington Libraries Special Collections.



ethnic divides within the canneries and ultimately challenged their influential power. The AFL became viewed as an extension of the oppression felt within the canneries. The CWFLU viewed support for the JCWA as support for ethnic divides. Subsequently, the CWFLU recognized that their own methods of organization supported these divides. CWFLU leaders therefore began recruiting more non-Filipino workers. Their primary target was the Japanese, as Seattle's Chinese laborers were fairly well represented in the CWFLU through several local activists.²⁶ The CWFLU held "Special Meetings" for Japanese recruits in order "to enlighten and clarify the issue which Attorney C. Arai had erroneously spread to the Japanese workers with regards to the purpose of the CWFLU."²⁷ At these meetings, CWFLU leaders evoked the union's original purpose of being an organization for all laborers and also adamantly rejected the contract system. The CWFLU challenged the JCWA, calling it a "puppet union" of the AFL used to exacerbate tensions amongst workers and to interfere with negotiations between unions and cannery owners. During one of these "Special Meetings," CWFLU member Brother Woolf's speech symbolized this new shift in the union's approach: "as a separate group...one cannot succeed to win a fight to better the lot of workers and improve the living condition of our less unfortunate workers."²⁸ As Woolf's quote

reveals, the CWFLU by early 1937 had developed a pan-Asian consciousness that union members would utilize to combat inequities for all workers in the canneries.

The CWFLU solidified this break from its old ethnocentric methods with its detachment from the AFL. After 1935 the tension between the AFL and the CWFLU forced union leaders to search for new organizations to affiliate with. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) seemed promising. The CIO was a working-class organization formed by former radical members of the AFL that recruited across ethnic and economic boundaries.²⁹ The CIO position stood in stark contrast to the AFL's public slurs and threats to pursue legal action should the CWFLU disband from the AFL.³⁰ Affiliation with the CIO provided a chance for the CWFLU to publically confirm its ideological shift to ethnic inclusion. On September 13, 1937 an emergency committee gathered to review the issue unanimously voted to "sever and disassociate all connections and relationships" with the AFL and formally accepted a charter from the United Cannery Agricultural Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), CIO Local 7.³¹ The shift built upon the CWFLU's gravitation toward a pan-Asian consciousness.

The development of a pan-Asian consciousness strengthened the CWFLU. The alliance between Filipinos, Japanese, and

²⁶ Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor*, p. 158.

²⁷ Minutes of a Special meeting of Japanese Group Feb. 11, 1937, Box ¼ Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union Local 7 Records, Acc. 3927-1, University of Washington Libraries Special Collections.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor*, p. 156.

³⁰ Ibid., 164.

³¹ Minutes from an Emergency Committee Meeting Sept. 13, 1937, Box 1/6 Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union Local 7 Records, Acc. 3927-1, University of Washington Libraries Special Collections.



Chinese cannery workers challenged the racial divides upheld by the contract system. The union's ability to garner broad based support allowed it to break the contract system, as by 1937 the CWFLU handled virtually all hiring between members and the canneries and helped set standardized wages to ensure fairness and mobility for all workers.³² This allowed all Asian and Asian American workers more agency over themselves as workers, reducing the degree of exploitation imposed on them. The CWFLU's ability to recognize ethnic divides took power away from the contractors and owners and put it into the worker's hands.

The pan-Asian consciousness that the CWFLU formed also provided Filipinos in Seattle with a unique opportunity to address issues stemming from their status in the greater social context. As U.S. nationals, Filipino immigrants lived the early part of the twentieth century within the confines of the colonial label. The typical Filipino immigrant was exposed to U.S. education and economic systems while in the Philippines.³³ In addition, the values of the U.S. were being promoted to Filipinos by their colonizers. To a certain degree, this seasoned immigrants to expect these values to be upheld in the U.S., which quickly became viewed as a source of economic and social opportunity. Indeed many immigrants who came to the U.S. were young males in search of higher education. Upon arrival, many Filipinos discovered that the

ideals promoted to them were not available to them on American soil. Treated like social outcasts, the promises of the U.S. lost significance and they became part of a growing group of non-white, oppressed immigrants. The continued dominance of the U.S. in their home country did not allow Filipinos to connect completely with immigrants with no explicit exposure to U.S. colonialism. Thus, Filipino immigrants struggled between their identity as "immigrants" and as "colonials."

Through the CWFLU, Filipino cannery workers in Seattle developed a nationalist identity that paralleled their formation of a pan-Asian consciousness. In the union's early years Filipinos organized around their shared national origin. This, however, was not enough to cause a huge break from their colonial connection to the U.S. During the 1934 NRA hearing, Duyungan appealed to the colonial ties between the U.S. and the Philippines in an attempt to strengthen support for Filipinos.³⁴ "The Filipinos like myself," stated Duyungan "are born under the American flag, the Stars and Stripes." Duyungan's statement reveals the continued association Filipino immigrants made with their colonial status despite decades of living under oppressed conditions that contradicted the ideals promoted to them. Duyungan's statements on the subject did not stop there, however, and revealed the other side of this identity struggle. "The Filipino people do not have anybody to represent them in this country...we are being prejudiced by our American neighbors." This statement shows that Filipinos were acutely aware of the effects of their colonial status, which left them

³² Crystal Fresco, "Cannery Workers' and Farm Laborers' Union 1933-39: Their Strength in Unity" Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project, <http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/cwflu> (accessed Oct. 27, 2010).

³³ Fujita-Rony, *American Workers, Colonial Power*, pp. 51-75.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 185.



disconnected from the American sphere of their colonizers.

As the CWFLU evolved into a pan-Asian coalition, Filipino cannery workers recognized the similar treatment accorded to “others” that did not fit into the dominant white society. By recognizing ethnic divides in the canneries, Filipino workers discovered that their treatment aligned more with their fellow ethnic workers than to American citizens, whom their “national” status should have accorded them more connection with. The enactment of the Tydings-McDuffie Act in 1934 likely encouraged this recognition and the CWFLU’s subsequent reformation of tactics. The act stripped Filipino immigrants of their national status, made them aliens, and limited immigration. This was enacted on the eve of the CWFLU’s shift to a more inclusive recruitment model. It is likely, when viewed in light of the recognition of working-class struggles across ethnic divides, that the act further encouraged the development of the CWFLU’S pan-Asian consciousness. In any case, the pan-Asian consciousness forged ties between Filipinos and other Asian workers through the recognition of similar treatment as “others” on account of their non-white ethnicities. Membership in the CWFLU allowed Filipinos to be recognized as a national group among other Asian nationalities. The CWFLU allowed Filipinos to assert themselves as Filipinos in America and to distance themselves from their “colonial” status.

Excerpts from a poem titled “Confidential Note To The Pilipinos” by Simeon Doria Arroyo, a Filipino pioneer who immigrated to the U.S. in the 1930s, reveal a deep connection between Filipinos laborers in

the U.S. and the struggle with their colonial identity:³⁵

...The Twentieth Century tells you how
America
Has civilized, modernized and
commercialized
Her slave markets into Employment
Agencies.
And you—brown slaves from the Far East
Are sold on commission as Dishwashers,
Waiters, Janitors, Bus-Boys, Porters, etc...

In the Jigsaw-puzzle of American life
You are an indispensable part
In its social complexity.
You will fit somehow—somehow—
But you do not have to sell
Your soul and body away!

Blast your way into the American scene.
(Culturally not Criminally)
And Dynamite its consciousness to atoms.
Assert incisively what is nationally best in
you,
If you have to infuse your blood in it!

Arroyo’s words resonate with the experiences of Filipino laborers in the canneries during the 1930s. His poem suggests an awareness of both the ideals promoted to colonials by America and the shortcomings of the promises those ideals entailed. Duyungan’s speech at the NRA hearings also displayed this awareness. Arroyo’s poem further speaks to the recruitment of

³⁵ Simeon Doria Arroyo, “Confidential Note to the Pilipinos,” *Diwang Pilipino: Pilipino Consciousness* (Davis: University of California Davis: 1974), p. 90.



immigrants into undesirable and menial jobs and to the exploitation of these workers. The salmon-canneries of the Pacific Northwest and the contract system utilized by them exemplify this pattern.

Arroyo also notes that Filipinos were “an indispensable part” of American life. Without the cheap labor that Asian immigrant workers provided, the canneries would not have prospered, inhibiting the growth of Washington and the Pacific Northwest. Years of exploitation and oppression led Filipinos of the CWFLU to follow the guidelines laid out in Arroyo’s poem, which notes that “you do not have to sell your soul and body away!” The canneries and the contract system it upheld forced Asian and Asian American workers to do just that,

adhering to a system that exploited them as resources to maximize profits. The CWFLU broke through this system, “culturally not criminally” as Arroyo would have it, and challenged ethnic divides that locked workers in their oppressive conditions. The CWFLU’s pan-Asian consciousness enabled them to do much more than garner higher wages and better working conditions. In the words of Arroyo, the CWFLU allowed Filipinos in the canneries to recognize what was “nationally best” in them, letting them separate themselves from the oppressive confines of their colonial status. The CWFLU, therefore, stands as a testament to the strength of organization across ethnic lines to effect change for the benefit of all.



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