

Race, Labor, and Indigeneity

Remembering the Struggles that Made Modern Hawai'i to Evoke Courage for Today

by Ellen-Rae Cachola

On September 2, 2020, the [Race, Labor, and Indigeneity](#) exhibit was launched by Ellen-Rae Cachola of the [University of Hawai'i School of Law Library Archives](#), Leslie Lopez of the [Center for Labor Education and Research](#) (CLEAR) at the University of Hawai'i West O'ahu, and Micah Mizukami of the [Center for Oral History](#) at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Our intent was to bring together archival and oral histories of Native Hawaiian and immigrant experiences during Hawai'i's plantation era, and to spark a contemporary discussion on possible linkages between Hawai'i's labor and Native Hawaiian land protection movements.

Before the plantations, Kanaka Maoli organized the ahupua'a system, a watershed management system that generated a self-subsistent food system and culture. The introduction of capitalism by western merchants eroded this system by commercializing the land, and by recruiting people to become laborers for their business enterprises. The steady flow of subordinate workers for capitalist industries was codified by the [Masters and Servants Act](#), established by Chief Justice William Little Lee in 1850. This Act was repealed at the beginning of the Territorial Era but foreshadowed the power that business interests would have over Hawaiian land and labor in the coming years.

The [Center for Oral History](#) documented oral histories of Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino people who worked and lived in the plantation communities. The earliest of these oral histories reflected a willingness to work across cultures. But as the capitalist dictates of the plantation work life monetized labor, it began to stratify the worth of different people, fostering social and economic conflicts among the workers and their employers.



Ide Kaneoka Milles of Nahiku Village, Maui, discussed her experience working in Maui Pineapple Company in 1946. Her story, and others like it, can be found at the Center for Oral History, UH Mānoa.

the center for labor education & research,
university of hawaii- west oahu:
the honolulu record digitization project

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about the record

In 1948, Koji Ariyoshi, a social activist, published a labor focused newspaper called the Honolulu Record. Founded on social change, Koji wanted to present another view on local and world issues, especially issues that affected the working class people of Hawaii.



The Center for Labor understands the importance of this type of resource when researching historical events. Believing in multi-media approach, the Center hopes to re-tell the stories in a manner that brings them to life.

With a gracious donation from the Arthur Rutledge Endowment and a grant from the Hawaii Council for the Humanities, the Center is able to provide the public with this digitization project.

The Honolulu Record was edited by Koji Ariyoshi. This newspaper documented workers' issues throughout the island's during the Territory Era. Visit the Center for Labor Education and Research for access to this digital and physical newspaper collection.

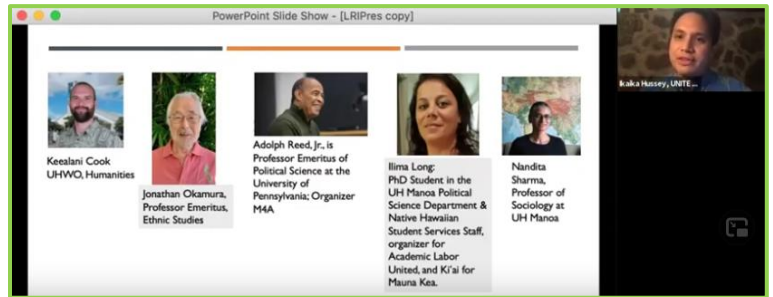
Labor organizers came forward. The CLEAR holds archival materials of Kanaka Maoli labor organizer Harry Kamoku, African-American writer [Frank Marshall Davis](#), Japanese newspaper editor [Koji Ariyoshi](#) and Filipino wild cat labor organizer [Pedro de la Cruz](#). These individuals organized workers to stand up for their rights, and educated the community on the plight of the worker, during a time when the mainstream media and courts were controlled by plantation owners. Organizing and communicating across the islands pushed diverse workers to overcome the ethnic and class hierarchies set up by the plantation owners. Workers organized strikes to demand dignity on the job, even if tensions would arise with fellow workers who crossed picket lines.

Lawyers got involved to represent workers who were jailed for striking. Eventually, the persistence of Hawai'i's labor movement disrupted business operations, so that employers did improve wages and working conditions. But corporations then moved operations to other parts of the world where there were less worker and environmental laws. The agricultural plantation economy slowed down, compelling government leaders to set up tourism to become the new economic driver for the islands.

This economic shift destabilized the agricultural unions. Some working class Hawaiians and immigrants shifted into politics to push for government representation through the Democratic Revolution. [Labor and Native Hawaiian interests shaped Hawai'i's 1978 Constitution](#), the current constitution of today

Since the 1960s, the Hawaiian Sovereignty movement has advocated for indigenous and environmental rights to challenge the overdevelopment and overpopulation that tourism accommodates. Workers within hotels have also been exploited by multinational hotel owners that threatened to lay off workers to automate operations, and to sell off benefits to lower their operational costs. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down travel, revealing the inability of the tourism industry to offer a sustainable and secure job for Hawai'i's people.

The exhibit launch featured an online [Community Discussion](#) among leaders from Native Hawaiian, working class, and immigrant communities to reflect on Hawai'i's labor history, and if it is possible to generate new frameworks for unity. Panelists discussed the need for genuine relationship building across the different cultures in Hawai'i, the need to organize around class in addition to race, and the need for Hawaiian and labor movements to learn more about each other. The pandemic and economic uncertainty demands our island communities communicate and work together once again.



Screenshot of the panelist bios of the online community discussion of the Race, Labor, & Indigeneity exhibit. The Community Discussion can be found on the [exhibit website](#)

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our virtual exhibit at the
2020 HLA + HASL Meeting!
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winners of our book raffle!

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