

National Coalition to Spearhead

350 Attend National Coalition for Redress-Reparations Conference Form Shaky Alliance to Present United Community Front in Seeking

They ranged from the curious to the committed, and they came from throughout the United States—from places as far north as Alaska, as far east as New York and as far south as Georgia.

About 350 Japanese Americans met at the Student Union Building of Calif. State University, Los Angeles Nov. 15 and 16 to map strategies for tackling an elusive goal that has haunted their community for the past four decades: Seeking and winning redress for the mass imprisonment of West Coast Japanese during World War II. Sponsored by the newly-formed National Coalition for Redress/Reparations, the two-day gathering was the first inter-organizational redress conference ever held.

With hearings of a proposed residential Commission on War-time Relocation and Internment of Civilians expected early next year, last month's conference confirmed that although there is substantial interest in the issue among members of the Japanese American community, much debate and struggle will have to take place inside Japanese America before it will truly be ready to take demands for government compensation to larger arenas. And, according to the members of the redress/reparations coalition, this need for community discussion was exactly why the conference was convened.

Proceedings opened with a keynote address by Dr. Gordon Kiyoshi Hirabayashi, a 62-year old Seattle-born Nisei who in May of 1942 intentionally violated both the military exclusion order and curfew restrictions imposed upon persons of Japanese ancestry on principle. Hirabayashi was convicted of both "violations" and later lost a constitutional test case of the curfew order's validity before the U.S. Supreme Court.

"The efforts of citizens concerned will make a difference," Dr. Hirabayashi, now a professor of sociology at the Univ. of Washington, told the opening day audience.

"Those who have direct information on what took place have an obligation to speak out (during the upcoming hearings) and remind people of what happened, because American history has suffered some kind of amnesia about these particular events," said Hirabayashi.

Although he urged Japanese Americans to assume an active posture before the commission studying whether wrongs were committed by the government in relocating and incarcerating Japanese Americans and others, Hirabayashi tempered his enthusiasm for that process by adding that the commission could respond in several ways to information brought before them.

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Rauh has agreed to file the suit on behalf of Japanese Americans who spent time in concentration camps.

"A class action suit," Hohri asserted, "is our opportunity to extract a judgement from the courts that we were subjected to a massive miscarriage of justice."

Hohri explained that the class action suit will cost \$75,000 to launch and asked for NCRR support of the planned legal move. Nearly all those present, except for a few dissenting JACL members in attendance, showed their support of NCJAR's class action proposal by standing and applauding.

"The decision whether to proceed is ours and ours alone," Hohri advised the conferees. It is not up to the members of Congress. It's not up to the JACL leaders, It's not up to your boss or community leaders or the rich man down the street. It's not up to Walter Cronkite or Ronnie Reagan—It's up to us."



CONFEREES CROWD CAL STATE L.A.'S student Union during the Nov. 15 general assembly of the first inter-organizational conference on redress/reparations.

"On one hand, the commission could result in nearly everything we would like. On the other hand, it could explore the situation and note, 'After all, we were at war,' and issue a statement of regret. Or it could be something in between," he said.

Hirabayashi offered one last commission scenario. "They could come up with fairly strong recommendations (for reparations) after the hearings and have them watered down by Congress or vetoed by the president."

Following his bittersweet assessment of the commission concept, Hirabayashi repeated his call for Japanese Americans to take action on redress.

"As a people sensitive to a great American wrong, we have a special responsibility, a special obligation to bring this wrong to America's attention and to get corrections made on behalf of America," he stressed.

"This is not a special Japanese American case. This is an American case," Hirabayashi insisted. "And if we wish to exercise first-class citizenship, we have to take the lead in doing something about it"

(The next major address during the Saturday session of the NCCR conference was delivered by Philemon M. Tutiakoff, a spokesman for the Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association, whose people endured a forced relocation by U.S. military personnel in 1942. The circumstances surrounding the WWII Aleut experience will be covered in detail in an interview with Tutiakoff to be published in an upcoming edition of The Rafu Shimpo.)



William Hohri, national chairperson of the Seattle/Chicago-based National Council for Japanese American Redress, characterized the movement for Japanese American redress as "a simple act of justice" in his part satirical, sometimes bitter and emotional presentation to the conference general assembly. (See excerpt of Hohri's statement below.)

Hohri, a vocal critic of Japanese American Citizens League policies during the period prior to and during the wartime camps who also opposes the JACL's current position regarding redress, introduced an alternative to the study commission approach in the form of a class action suit his organization is in the process of filing against the United States government.

The Manzanar-incarcerated Nisei explained that the law firm of Landis, Cullen, Singman and

Lead Nikkei Redress Drive

Conference at Cal State L.A.; Hohri-Led NCJAR, JACL and Host Unit Seeking Compensation for World War II Incarceration

In the weeks leading up to the National Coalition on Redress/Reparations Conference, the JACL had come under fire for its unauthorized use of material on the redress issue by New York-based author-researcher Michi Weglyn. (A pamphlet on the evacuation experience distributed by JACL officials made use of passages from Weglyn's book on the evacuation and camps, "Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps" without permission of its publisher—William Morrow and Co.—or its author. The JACL had claimed copyright to the material in the pamphlet, drawing protests from the author and publisher. Although retractions of the copyright claim were printed in the 'CL's newsletter, "Pacific Citizen," along with apology/clarifications from JACL "National Committee for Redress" officials, many Japanese Americans viewed the episode as a display of, at worst, unsavory tactics, or otherwise, neglected and ineptitude.

Redress proponents also had questioned the 'CL's method of submitting its nominations to the study commission to the White House and Congress (Citizens league officials revealed their commission nominees to the public after they had been submitted and after the deadline for submitting names had lapsed).

Then, NCRP learned that a memorandum had been circulated in Northern California by a JACL official discouraging 'CL members from working with the coalition, implying that the group planned to disrupt hearings of the Presidential Study Commission. More than a few interpreted the memo as an attempt to discredit any attempt to form a redress coalition outside the JACL and, possibly, an attempt to damage the Los Angeles conference.

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The unenviable task of explaining JACL policies to the NCRP Conference fell on the shoulders of Ron Wakabayashi, Southern California member of the 'CL's redress committee.

Standing to address the conference's general assembly following NCJAR representative Hohri's blistering attack on the organization, Wakabayashi, a 35-year old Sansei, seemed himself unsure of what JACL policy was and delivered a somewhat ambivalent defense of the controversial league.

"I'm a little uncomfortable about the JACL position on the (redress) issues," admitted Wakabayashi. "(But) whatever the JACL stand is we have to understand what limits and what functions it has in this campaign."

Emphasizing that the JACL name and image as a legitimate organization is recognized by Congress, Wakabayashi called the organization "a vehicle to help the process take place." He explained that he considered the study commission to be part of a process of learning about the wartime experience of Japanese Americans and a process by which to heal

emotional scars and generational conflicts stemming from the camps.

While stressing that it was his understanding that the JACL supports a campaign for direct monetary compensation, Wakabayashi, a candidate for the now-vacant 'CL national director's job, admitted that some organization members are making statements which contradict league policy, naming as an example influential 'CLer Mike Masaoka.

"The problem with JACL is that it's an old guard organization. Some of the oldtimers act in a very individualistic manner," he said.

Wakabayashi admitted there had been serious "snafus" and "oversights" in the JACL's handling of the redress campaign but continued to characterize the organization as "the leading group in (the redress) movement."

The JACL spokesman revealed the organization's commission nominees were submitted without 'CL redress committee review. In reference to the anti-NCRP memo, he said he felt the wording of the message had been "a little paranoid."

"I don't think the organization is going to say it's sorry. But I'm sorry the organization has made the kind of errors it has," Wakabayashi told the conference audience.

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Reasserting the conference's emphasis of community unity in the redress/reparations movement was the final speaker Saturday, Bert Nakano, a Nisei who was interned at the Jerome, Arkansas and Tule Lake, Calif. camps. Nakano, a Gardena resident, served as the spokesman for the sponsoring National Coalition for Redress/Reparations.

"As I stand here and look around today," Nakano began, "I feel that we're in a very exciting and significant period. Issei, Nisei, Sansei, newcomers and other nationalities; all coming together to build a nation-wide movement for Japanese American redress."

Hawaii-born Nakano described NCRP as a "peoples' organization" seeking diverse input using grass-roots methods. He said the goal of the coalition was to organize Japanese America for the struggle ahead, and added that the strength of the group would be its willingness to draw from the vast experience of all the member organizations—from student groups to the JACL. He encouraged all community groups, individuals, churches, cultural groups and professional organizations to mobilize for the upcoming study commission hearings.

But Nakano and NCRP added another dimension to the redress discussion.

"At the same time we organize for the hearings we also realize that we can't expect the commission on congress to willingly recommend reparations and redress," Nakano said. "We shouldn't forget that it was the government that put us into camps in the first

vented the Japanese from owning place, and even before that, pre-land and from becoming citizens or even immigrating to this country."

Nakano said NCRP believes that Japanese America must do more than present the facts to the com-

redress; that we have to understand political realities and that to demand redress would turn off congress.

"We disagree!" Nakano bellowed. "On the contrary, we have seen in the past that mass organizing and militant action has accom-



CONSTITUTIONAL TEST CASE PLAINTIFF Dr. Gordon Hirabayashi addresses the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations. "This is not a special Japanese American case. This is an American case."

mission and leave it up to their wisdom.

"One thing is for sure, our struggle doesn't stop when the commission ends."

The NCRP spokesman said that at the same time as the coalition is mobilizing for the commission hearings, it also will be actively pursuing other avenues, such as a direct appropriations redress bill, similar to one introduced during the 96th Congress by Washington Congressman Mike Lowry. He said the group would also be seeking redress through the courts—possibly through a class action suit as proposed by NCJAR's Hohri.

A fiery speaker, Nakano reminded the conferees, "Some members of our community are of the opinion that we should not demand plished much. In fact, it is the only thing that has gotten results."

As examples of triumphs gained through community tenacity, Nakano cited gains in civil rights such as affirmative action and ethnic studies in the public schools.

"We know our struggle will be long, and that's why we can't afford to lose any more time. Already, many of our Issei and even Nisei, are gone. Forty years for justice is too long. Japanese people unite. Justice now, Reparations now."

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The NCRP conference included two separate sessions—morning and afternoon—of workshops focusing on such varied redress-related topics as "Religious Perspectives on Reparations," "Impact of the Camps on the Community, Families and Indl-

Redress-Reparations Conference

(Continued from Page 1)

viduals and an "Experience Sharing Workshop" in which former internees shared impressions of camp life with younger people attending the conference.

In a workshop entitled "Pursuing Reparations Through the Law," Asian American community lawyers offered their analyses of the 1948 Japanese American Evacuation Claims Act in which the government agreed to partial settlements for losses suffered by Nikkei during evacuation. Attorney Ken Kamei explained that under this act the government compensated some individuals for a small percentage of their real and property losses. He noted there have never been reparations for personal hardships, injury or other types of loss.

Part of the original claims act, the lawyers pointed out, was a stipulation that the government had to admit no blame for the losses due to the "military necessity" justification for the evacuation.

Deputy Los Angeles County Counsel Alan Terakawa discussed the Sioux Nation Suit which in 1978 saw Congress pass "enabling legislation" recognizing the Sioux nation's right to compensation for property taken from them by the government in 1877.

"Enabling legislation" Kamei and Terakawa explained could set aside the statute of limitations and stipulations of the 1948 Claims Act, which at the time was considered legally to constitute the government's final liability for its treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

The enabling legislation, if obtainable, also would allow internees and their heirs to seek re-

dress on the grounds that the government subjected them to "personal hardships" and that Japanese America is owed a "moral debt" by the United States, according to the attorneys.

Such legislation also would allow review of the Supreme Court cases which now hold the "military necessity" justification for the curfews, exclusion orders and internment of Nikkei to be constitutional, said the lawyers.

Those attending the conference also enjoyed some lighter moments. Saturday evening the coalition presented a cultural program. A nostalgic touch from the camp years was provided when Mary Nomura, known as "The Songbird of Manzanar," sang "The Manzanar Song," a piece written especially for her by the late Manzanar school teacher Lou Frizzell.

The conference reconvened on Sunday morning, and the NCCR's five-point "Principles of Unity" won unanimous approval, plans for the proposed commission hearings were discussed, coalition

structure was refined, and plans for regional meetings were discussed.

The conference was adjourned on a note of solidarity, but the sharp edges of conflicting agendas that had been bared during first day's general assembly still remained.

Warren Furutani, a Sansei activist voice from the late-60s, early-70s offered what could prove to be a prophetic observation on the still-nebulous NCCR/JACL relationship:

"As a former employee of the JACL I can tell you that the organization allows democracy up to a certain level. Beyond that point there is no democracy. I think if the community puts too many eggs in the JACL's commission basket, we're destined for trouble. The commission may be a vehicle but I'm wondering who's in the driver's seat?"

Warned Furutani: "The JACL leadership is taking Japanese Americans down the wrong road, just like they did during World War II."

—DWIGHT CHUMAN