

THE WORLD WAR II IMPRISONMENT OF JAPANESE IN U.S. CONCENTRATION CAMPS



*All the participants in the April, 1975 Tule Lake Pilgrimage lined up before an old guard tower for this group photo.
(Getting Together photo)*

Articles by
GETTING TOGETHER
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Learn from the past for struggles today U.S. Concentration Camps

During World War II, 112,000 Japanese Americans were imprisoned in ten U.S. concentration camps. Their property was seized and they were forced to live for nearly 4 years in desolate prison camps, under armed guard, and in deplorable shanty town conditions. They were exploited as cheap labor, and treated as enemy aliens, despite the fact that many were U.S. citizens by birth, and few had any relations with the Japanese fascists.

By the time of the camps, Japanese in the U.S. had already undergone 50 years of systematic national oppression by the U.S. ruling class. Japanese agricultural workers were exploited as cheap labor in Hawaii and throughout the West Coast. Japanese were forced into segregated communities. Over 500 pieces of anti-Japanese legislation were passed, denying Japanese immigrants such basic rights as the right to become naturalized U.S. citizens and to own land. They suffered marriage restrictions and discrimination against their language and customs. They were oppressed as a national minority in an all-sided way.

When fascist Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the U.S. ruling class took advantage of the already oppressed status of Japanese, and whipped up anti-Japanese sentiment as a way of drumming up more support for the U.S. war effort. The government, the bourgeois mass media, and the trade union bureaucrats implied that Japanese in the U.S. were spies and enemy agents working for the Japanese fascists.

Agribusiness interests, greedy for the lands the Japanese had reclaimed from swamps and deserts, actively supported the anti-Japanese movement.

From December 7-9, 1941, Japanese



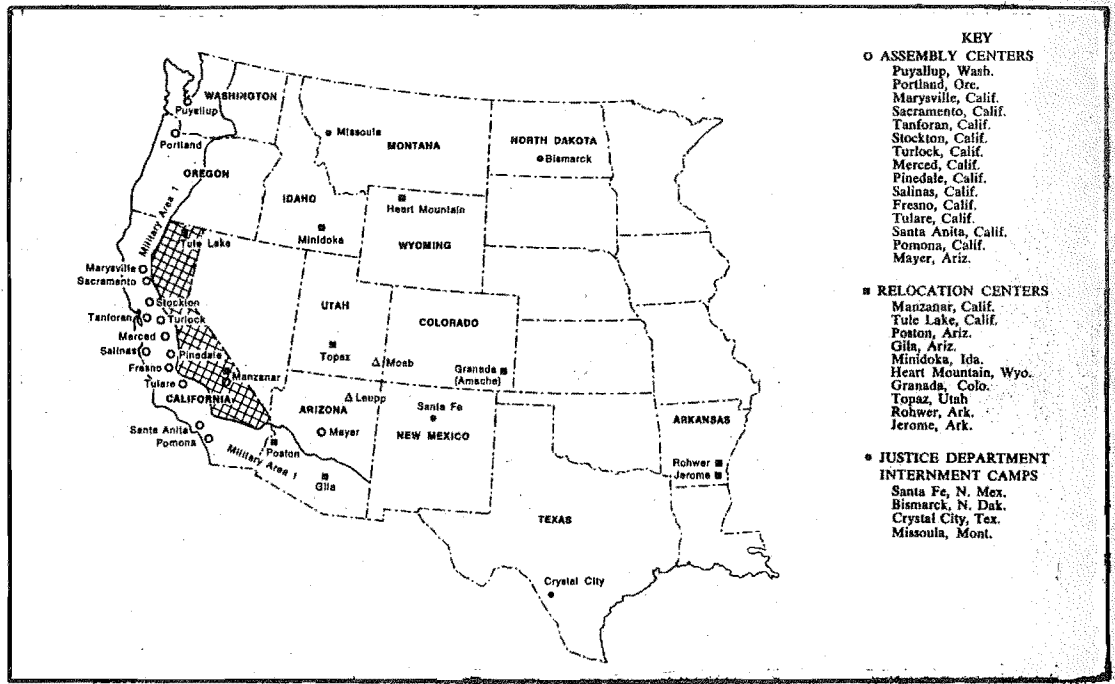
1942-1946: Homes in tar-paper shacks for Japanese.

community leaders were rounded up by the FBI and put into special prison camps. Other effects on the Japanese communities were immediate. One Issei (first generation Japanese in the U.S.), who lived in the San Francisco area related that, "As soon as the war (bombing of Pearl Harbor - ed.) started most Japanese lost their jobs. One time I got into an argument with a bus driver who refused to start the bus until I showed him proof of U.S. citizenship. I refused so I had to get off the bus."

Then in March, 1942, the U.S. Congress approved Executive Order 9066, setting into motion the mass round-up of all Japanese from the West Coast. Citing "military necessity" as the reason, the U.S. government forced Japanese to leave their homes with just a few

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days notice, to be transported to concentration camps. The Japanese lost homes, businesses, farms, and other possessions, and their communities were destroyed.

Conditions and resistance in the camps

In the camps, tiny 20 by 24-foot rooms in tar-paper barracks housed as many as 8-10 people. The camps were surrounded by barbed wire fences and guarded by armed units of the U.S. military. Health facilities were inadequate, and the food was terrible.

People still had to pay for some necessities, and were compelled to work for the military, the War Relocation Authority, or contracted out to work for private agribusiness interests at an average pay of \$7-15 a month. Even that meager salary was not always paid. One Issei from San Francisco recalls: "At Walerga, one time we got a petition going for everybody to get paid for their jobs. All the professionals got paid, some kitchen help got paid and some didn't. But still you all worked."

The Japanese people resisted these inhuman conditions as they had resisted oppression throughout their history in the U.S. This same Issei related the following experience in the Topaz, Utah concentration camp:

"There were a lot of struggles over poor food and working conditions. There was one incident where we were fed pork liver three times a day for a week straight. The whole camp got together and protested."

A Nisei (second generation Japanese in the U.S.) from Los Angeles added, "Japanese were never passive during camp life — they were always aware of what was going on, but there was some fear of retaliation. They had such things as a blacklist, too. They would discourage people from taking active stands on simple basic issues such as conditions in the camps. My father came across the idea that as long as they were buying fish to be brought into the camp, why not bring in the kind of fish that Japanese ate? He was able to organize

enough people to propose this to the WRA, and he was blacklisted for that."

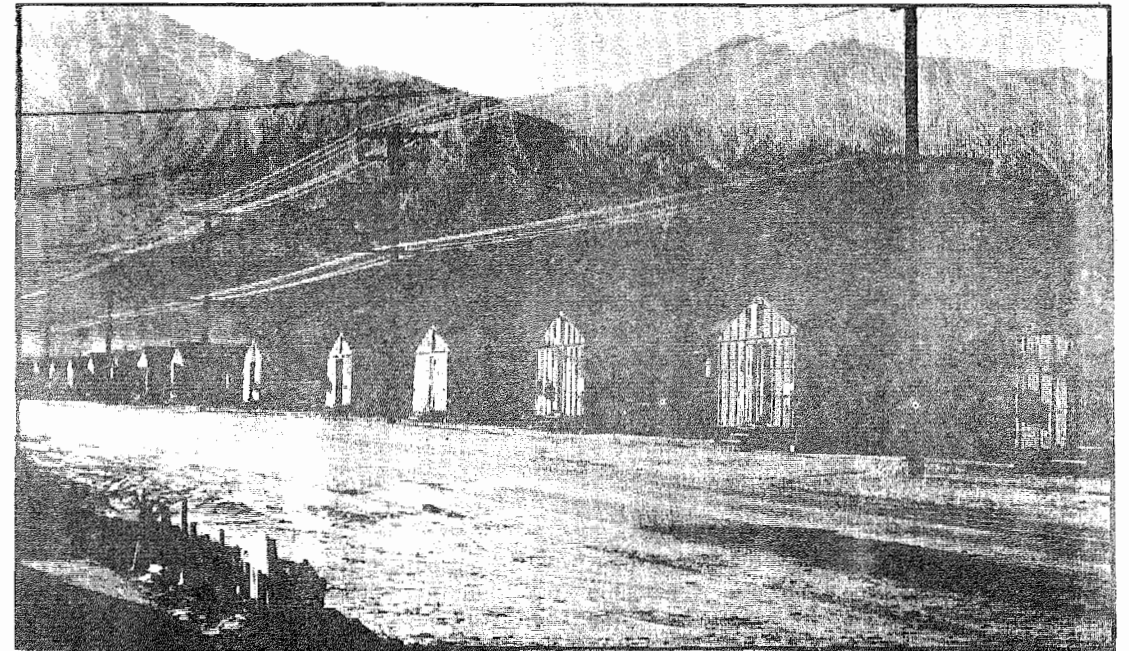
Another Nisei recounted that, "As soon as they found a 'troublemaker' in camp, they'd take the whole family and split them into two different camps, to keep people from being too organized in camp. The most active people were either put into a special high-security internment camp like Lawsberg, New Mexico, or were just sent to another camp."

And he added: "The Manzanar incident is another example. They (internees — ed.) didn't like the idea of one of their fellow men being jailed for his political activity, so they went up to the camp director and demanded his release. And of course, when the camp director saw these Japanese coming to his office en masse, he got excited and started to shoot at them. And this is what they called the 'riots'."

Overcoming many obstacles, Japanese people waged many fights to better their conditions within the camps and protested the very existence of the camps. In one camp for "dissidents and disloyals" — Tule Lake — the prisoners were in constant protest and defiance. In one general strike, the entire camp was shut down and a mass gathering of over 10,000 people demanded their rights. Even the government's response, with armed troops riding machine-gun mounted jeeps and the FBI agents invading the camp, could not stop the demonstrations and protest.

Years after the camps, the U.S. government announced that the concentration camps were just a big mistake, and could never happen again. This is nothing but a whitewash of the camps and the entire history of oppression of Japanese in the U.S. Recognizing that there is still much to be learned from the camp experience, hundreds of people hold programs and make pilgrimages each year to different concentration camp sites in the spirit of learning from the past to understand and serve the present struggles of Japanese in America.

"Farewell to Manzanar"— not the way it was



Manzanar, Calif. One of the largest concentration camps, it was located in the desolate Mojave desert.

In March, 1976, the film "Farewell to Manzanar" was aired on nationwide TV, stirring up a great deal of controversy over its distorted analysis of the U.S. concentration camps. It is based on the autobiography of a Nisei (second-generation Japanese in the U.S.) woman, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, who reminisces about her personal experiences as a young girl incarcerated at Manzanar, California. Manzanar was one of ten concentration camps in which over 110,000 Japanese were unjustly imprisoned during World War II.

Because it is one of the few films which depicts the imprisonment of Japanese in that period, "Manzanar" drew widespread attention. But the film shows the camps only as an ugly blot on U.S. history, and the Japanese as passive victims of a big but isolated "mistake."

The film begins at the time of Federal Executive Order 9066, which ordered *all* Japanese living within 200 miles of the West Coast to be rounded up, imprisoned in camps, and their property confiscated. The actual conditions

which led up to the massive relocation are totally ignored. The Wakatsuki family is depicted as a typical Japanese, yet in the film, they live a comfortable and carefree life.

This does not correspond at all with the reality of the oppressive working and living conditions generally experienced by the Japanese at that time. The Japanese have endured restrictions and attacks on their lives since they were first imported to the U.S. as agricultural laborers in the 1890's. "Manzanar" only serves to reinforce the misconception that it was just "racist hysteria" that led to the concentration camps, and that the Japanese were not historically oppressed as a minority nationality in the U.S.

Throughout its two hours length, the film shows no solution at all to the concentration camps, but implicitly advocates passive acceptance. The Wakatsuki family, along with thousands of other Japanese families, is shown as cooperatively - almost obediently - lining up to be tagged like pieces of baggage as they are being stripped of their basic rights and "relocated."

Once inside the camps, the film only superficially shows camp life in the tar-paper barracks. "Manzanar" includes scenes of mass meetings and demonstrations against the camp conditions, but twists the militancy of the masses into disorganized rioting, spontaneous resistance which leads them nowhere. The most militant demonstration during the film ends with no demands being met, and armed guards firing on the interned Japanese. The film implies the shooting was only an act of self-defense in the face of a "violent mob" led by "unruly extremists."

While pro-Japanese fascists did participate in and even lead some of the demonstrations in the camps, the majority of protests were aimed against the intolerable camp conditions and unjust imprisonment. "Manzanar" gives credibility to the repressive measures of the War Relocation Authority (WRA - the federal agency which oversaw the execution of Execu-

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tive Order 9066 and administered all the concentration camps), and implies that resistance was led only by the pro-fascists.

CPUSA: defender of the bourgeoisie

While many Japanese remember with anger the role the Japanese American Citizens League played in cooperating with the WRA, it was the Communist Party, USA which played the most treacherous role in this period. While purporting to give revolutionary leadership to the masses of Japanese in the U.S., the CPUSA kicked out all Japanese members in 1942 and condoned the camps by the same logic that the ruling class used - that it would protect the U.S. interests in the war against Japanese militarism and German and Italian fascism. The CPUSA objectively abandoned the Japanese people to the U.S. bourgeoisie's prison camps, leaving the people inside the camps without any revolutionary leadership, and ceasing to struggle in their support outside of the camps.

It was imperative for communists to lead the fight against the fascists of Japan, Germany and Italy during World War II. But to oppose fascism internationally, yet allow and even participate in the oppression of a national minority domestically, was a serious error. This error of capitulation to the U.S. bourgeoisie in the 1940's was part of a tendency which led the CPUSA to renounce its revolutionary leadership in the 1950's.

It is no accident that one of the film's main consultants and defenders is a CPUSA member, Karl Yoneda. He apologizes for the insults and slander of the Japanese people and the distortions of history in "Manzanar" by saying that it gave some acting jobs to Asians and might help the Japanese get reparations for the damages of the camps (*Comments on the TV film, 'Farewell to Manzanar,'* 3/15/76). Decent jobs and reparations are genuine demands for the Japanese people which can be fought for and won, but this can be done without the lies and distortions of

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"Manzanar."

"Farewell to Manzanar," in the final analysis, only serves to distort a part of history that has long been concealed from the American public. It denies that the roots of the concentration camps lie in the historical

national oppression of Japanese in the U.S., and slanders their resistance to the camps. It does disservice to the struggles of the masses of Japanese, both then and now, for equality and an end to national oppression.

(Adapted from article in May, 1976 issue)

9th annual Manzanar Pilgrimage

Over 400 people participated in the ninth annual Manzanar Pilgrimage sponsored by the Los Angeles based Manzanar Committee over the weekend of April 22-23. Manzanar is one of 10 concentration camps where Japanese in the U.S. were imprisoned during World War II. It is in the Mojave Desert.

Many people have returned to Manzanar over the years to learn about what the camps were like, and about the significance of the camps to the ongoing struggles of today.

The Manzanar Pilgrimage program commemorated those who had protested the

brutal repression of the Japanese in the U.S. during World War II. There were also many other speakers and organized activities. A representative of the Tule Lake Committee spoke of the lessons people can draw from the camps and extended an invitation to the Tule Lake Pilgrimage. In the workshops, people discussed camp experiences as well as current issues such as the Bakke Decision and the destruction and dispersal of Japanese communities. Cultural events completed the program.

(Getting Together photo)



Japanese people of all ages along with people of different nationalities are passing before a monument erected during the camps in honor of all Japanese who died in the U.S. concentration camps.

Loyalty Oath: Not a question of loyalty



Tule Lake, Calif. was the site of the camp designated for "disloyals." Early morning raids and other forms of harassment were common.

The following article was adapted from a response by Getting Together to a letter from a reader about the loyalty oath imposed by the U.S. government on Japanese while they were imprisoned in the concentration camps. The loyalty oath was part of a plan to "process" Japanese in the camps for resettlement or enlistment in the U.S. armed forces. The two crucial questions were:

"Question 27: Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States in combat duty, wherever ordered?"

"Question 28: Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and foreswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power or organization?"

The U.S. government, having stripped the Japanese of all their rights, used the loyalty oath as another way to suppress the anger of the Japanese in the U.S. and to further divide them. Differing views on the loyalty oath have

been one of the most difficult issues to resolve among Japanese in the U.S.

One view among some Japanese is that answering "yes-yes" on questions 27 and 28 meant acceptance of the concentration camps,

and that answering "no-no" was an act of resistance. Another view is that "yes-yes" answers were a way of proving loyalty to the U.S. government, while answering "no-no" meant support for the Emperor and for Japanese militarism.

Actually, there is no single way to categorize the positions that individual Japanese took on the loyalty oath. Some answered "yes-yes" because they genuinely believed in the importance of the international struggle against fascism. Others answered "yes-yes" because they had misconceptions about the nature of the U.S. bourgeoisie, and felt the need to "prove" their loyalty.

Most of the Japanese who answered "no-no" did so because they were outraged at their incarceration in the concentration camps. Others were misled to believe that the Japanese militarists were genuinely concerned with the Japanese in the U.S. — a view that was fanned up by a handful of pro-fascist reactionaries among the Japanese. Still others answered "no-no" because to answer "yes" would have left them stateless; Issei (first-generation Japanese) were not allowed U.S. citizenship until 1950.

Thus, the loyalty oath was fraught with contradictions, the most glaring being the fact that the Japanese were imprisoned as enemy aliens. Even a "yes-yes" answer did not change this status; Japanese men who joined the U.S. army and went off to combat, left their families behind barbed wire, under the watchful eye of the same U.S. armed forces.

Whatever their answers to these questions, we believe that the overwhelming majority of Japanese in the concentration camps were progressive-minded. They were outraged at the injustices and hardships of the camps, and struggled against them to the extent that they were able. The few reactionaries were those who either supported Japanese militarism or who acted as lackeys and stool pigeons for the U.S. imperialists.

The contradictions around the loyalty oath

have to be viewed in the context of the role that the Communist Party U.S.A. (CPUSA) played at that time. During World War II, the CPUSA correctly saw the danger of the fascist powers, and the importance of building the international United Front Against Fascism. But their mistake was to conciliate with the U.S. bourgeoisie.

As a revolutionary force, the CPUSA should have waged a militant struggle against the concentration camps. Instead, the CPUSA encouraged the Japanese to go into the camps, and even kicked out its Japanese members in 1942. In the name of strengthening the United Front Against Fascism, the CPUSA sacrificed the struggle against the national oppression and incarceration of the entire Japanese people in the U.S. Overall, the CPUSA liquidated its independent communist work during this period. They even forbade organizing communist units in the U.S. armed forces, thinking this would damage the United Front.

These and other errors led to the CPUSA's eventual abandonment of revolutionary principles. The CPUSA today has degenerated into a counter-revolutionary organization, incapable of leading any struggles against the U.S. bourgeoisie.

Had there been all-sided revolutionary leadership during World War II, the Japanese people could have better resisted the camps and the blackmail of the loyalty oath. The Japanese people, in unity with the working class and all other progressive people in the U.S., could have made greater contributions to the worldwide fight against fascism, and against class and national oppression inside the U.S.

(June-July, 1976)

Educational events build up for Tule Lake Pilgrimage



Sharing experiences from the concentration camps at the Sacramento Tule Lake program. (Getting Together photo)

Two educational programs were held in Sacramento and San Francisco during May, 1978, as part of the Tule Lake Pilgrimage activities. In both programs, many Issei and Nisei (first and second generation Japanese in the U.S.) displayed their camp mementos – drawings, shell brooches, camp photos, wood carvings and camp diaries. A photo exhibit from the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), called “Executive Order 9066,” documented the imprisonment of over 110,000 Japanese in the World War II U.S. concentration camps.

Over 75 people attended the Sacramento program sponsored by the regional Tule Lake Committee. Two Issei shared their experiences in the camps. A speaker from the Tule Lake Committee linked the racist incarceration of Japanese to the present-day attacks on the Japanese communities, such as redevelopment.

The San Francisco program featured a panel

discussion on the issue of reparations, or monetary compensation to the Japanese for losses caused by their internment in the camps. Panelists included representatives from the National Reparations Committee of the JACL, the Committee Against Nihonmachi Evictions (CANE), and two long-time residents of the San Francisco Japanese community. Discussion was lively, and a diversity of views were presented on how reparations should be fought for and used.

A skit related the camp experience to current struggles of Japanese in the U.S., including the Bakke Decision and its impact on Japanese people today.

Both programs were enthusiastically received, as everyone deepened their understanding of the camp experience and were encouraged to join the Tule Lake Pilgrimage.

Reparations - A just demand

Reparations - monetary compensation for the losses sustained during the World War II imprisonment of Japanese in the U.S. in concentration camps - has been an issue ever since they were released from the camps in 1946. In a current survey conducted among Japanese in the U.S., 94% of those responding affirmed their belief that the government is responsible for material losses during this period and should make reparations.

The issue of reparations is important, for it affects all Japanese Americans. While reparations cannot make up for the past and present oppression of Japanese people in this country, they have the right to be repaid for the material belongings stolen from them when they were forced into the camps.

Concentration camps cause great losses

When the Japanese militarists bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the U.S. ruling class - through Congress and its agents in the trade unions and mass media - launched a racist “patriotic” campaign against the Japanese in the U.S. They slandered the Japanese people in the U.S., falsely accusing them of aiding the fascist Japanese aggressors by sending signals from the hilltops or by cutting sugar cane arrows in the fields pointing to vital airstrips and strategic military areas.

Further exploiting the cover of “military necessity,” the FBI systematically moved through Japanese American communities in the cities and countryside, rounding up community leaders and heads of households and sending them to prison. Later, many were sent to special camps for Japanese Americans charged

with “treasonous acts.”

In March, 1942, Congress approved Executive Order 9066. Under this order, 112,000 Japanese living on the West Coast were forced to evacuate their homes to “prevent any threats of sabotage or treason.” Some had only 48 hours to pack. They were tagged like baggage, allowed to take only what they could carry. Many were forced to liquidate their homes and possessions, not knowing when or if they would ever return.

For the few who owned land, their property was seized and turned over to others to manage. Major Japanese American communities all along the West Coast of the U.S. were turned into ghost towns overnight.

The Japanese people were forced to live in the concentration camps for four years. The last camp was closed in March, 1946. Many returned to the West Coast to find their belongings stolen, ransacked or ruined. Most had no homes or land. Worse still, anti-Japanese violence persisted for months.

In Los Angeles, the Nichiren Buddhist Church had been used as a warehouse for Japanese people’s belongings during the camps. But upon their return, people found the caretaker gone along with all their stoves, washing machines and refrigerators. Their trunks, too, had been broken into and ransacked.

Faced with such losses, the demand for reparations reflected resistance to the real hardships the Japanese people faced.

In 1946, the JACL (Japanese American Citizens League) pressed for reparations. Although the estimated losses were placed at \$400 million, only a meager one-third of the

losses were recovered from the 24,000 claims filed. On top of this, the government repaid the losses based on the pre-war value of the dollar, so that only 10% of the value of the claims were paid. On the average, claimants received only \$440, and many died before even settling their claims.

A just demand

Today, the demand against the U.S. government for reparations is still a just demand for the Japanese people in the U.S. Japanese American families should be repaid for the losses of their homes, land and belongings.

The Japanese people are also justified in demanding that additional reparations be used for the benefit of the community. The concentration camps caused widespread destruction of Japanese communities such as Nihonmachi in San Francisco and Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, which are today being further threatened by redevelopment. Reparations can be used for the construction of low-rent housing, for the pre-

servation of these historical Japanese communities, and for providing some social services and educational funds.

The demand for reparations is still an active concern for many Japanese in the U.S., though there are differences in outlook. Some Japanese feel that reparations only brings back past bitterness and should be forgotten. Others feel that reparations will clear the government's record and signify that Japanese have achieved equality and justice.

Many Japanese American activists believe that reparations should be fought for. At the same time, they are pointing out that reparations cannot in itself do away with the whole system of oppression of Japanese as a people in this country. They are also trying to unite the Japanese people behind this demand and to win support from people of all nationalities. Learning from the results of the 1946 JACL suit, without organized mass resistance, the government will concede little or nothing.

(April, 1978)

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Getting Together has been a revolutionary newspaper since 1970. As the political organ of I Wor Kuen, a Marxist-Leninist organization, it is dedicated to developing a revolutionary analysis of concrete conditions and contributing toward building a genuine communist party in the U.S.

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