

New Dawn Rising: History and Summation of the Japan Town Collective

by Ray Tasaki

(This article was published initially in the book, Legacy to Liberation.)

I'm a third generation (Sansei) Japanese American. I experienced internment in a concentration camp during World War II at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, when over 120,000 Japanese Americans (two-thirds of whom were American citizens) were interned as "enemy aliens." After the Camps, I lived through the Eisenhower era, a time of sterile dominant white culture, racism and Cold War paranoia. I spent four years in the U.S. Marines, then twelve years on drugs. I was in gangs and spent time in county and state prisons during this time. But in 1969, while I was immersed in the clouds of psychedelic drugs, the winds and words of revolution, of struggle and change, reached me. I listened and got caught up in this movement to change U.S. society. I joined with others to start survival programs: drug rehab, legal aid, prison outreach, youth counseling, programs for the elderly and infirm. Then we tried to form a revolutionary core to lead and direct the struggles going on, but that core never materialized.

During this period, activists from all over the U.S. were traveling and connecting with one another: seeing, learning, making alliances and sharing. In San Francisco I got excited about the struggles led by the Black Panther Party, the Red Guard Party, Los Tres (a Chicano organization) and all the groups that were emerging in the Bay Area. I moved to the Bay Area in 1971 and starting working with people in San Francisco Chinatown, Japantown, in Berkeley and San Jose. It was at this time that I joined the Japan Town Collective. Here is my view of the history of that group and what happened.

During the summer of 1971, as the Red Guard Party in San Francisco was breaking up, some of its members joined with I Wor Kuen. A few of the Japanese American cadre of the Red Guard Party—people like Stan Kadani, Leo, and Neil Gotanda—a legal person who worked in the legal aid program in Chinatown, San Francisco—went to organize in the Japanese community in Japan Town San Francisco (Nihonmachi).

This core of activists started a study group composed of people from campuses and community groups, about a dozen in all. The study group read Mao's writings, such as "On Practice," to discuss what was happening in the world, such as in Vietnam, in Japan and Okinawa, and also the concept of "serve the people."

Some of the core that was to become the Japan Town Collective came from social service agencies, frustrated about the limitations of that kind of work to address the root causes of people's oppression, alienation and internalized racism and psychological self-effacement particular to Japanese Americans from being interned in camps during World War II.

One important agency that many activists worked in was the Japanese Community Youth Council (JCYC). This was a mass organization that organized programs for the youth in the Japan Town community. While some activists were revolutionaries and Marxist-Leninists, most weren't but they

did identify with the progressive social change movement. But the more revolutionary-minded activists were searching for a way to connect the struggle to end the oppression of Japanese Americans with the larger question of revolution.

These activists formed a "work-study collective" which developed the name of the Japan Town Collective. The JTC was seen as a preliminary and transitional step to joining a larger revolutionary organization. Some of the first actions by the JTC were participating in anti-war marches, support for struggles in Japan, especially the anti-military base struggle in Okinawa, and working in different coalitions. One of the first organizing and propaganda tools used by the JTC as guerilla theater skits performed in the community to highlight the struggles against those military bases in Okinawa, about how the bases were expanding and how they affected the people living around the bases. One particular struggle was around the Sanrizuka airbase near Tokyo and its expansion, bringing in more war planes, and how this was opposed by revolutionary students and workers in Japan at the time.

Because the JTC initially did not have a base in the community, the focus was placed on having a center, and from there, developing a broad propaganda and outreach about the Vietnam War, the struggles of Third World people. This center was in a building threatened with demolition by redevelopment. It was located next to a community church. The center was in a building that belonged to the church. A couple of people in JTC had ties to the church, so the church let JTC have use of the building.

The center was used as a base to do propaganda and organizing around opposing the U.S. imperialist war in Vietnam, to do film showings, hold forums, and run a revolutionary bookstore. JTC also worked in the Asian Women's Health Team and did high school organizing through the Asian Alliance at Washington High School. Following the example of the Black Panther Party "survival programs," the JTC offered legal services, health care, a prison program, etc. We started a revolutionary newspaper called New Dawn which featured articles about Third World liberation struggles and local community issues. All these activities were aimed at promoting revolutionary education and connecting all the struggles internationally with the Japanese American community.

One of the first large forums was about the United Farm Workers struggle against large agribusiness and corporate farming, and the role that Japanese American Nisei farmers played. The Japanese American Nisei farmers were small farmers, but often took the side of agribusiness against the UFW.

They were pretty adamant in their opposition to the UFW because they felt organizing farm workers would hurt them the most since they were small farming businesses. This forum brought out both sides of the struggle and was pretty enlightening to a lot of the people who attended.

We had film showings about the struggle in Japan and in other countries, especially from socialist China. We showed "The Red Detachment of Women."

From these activities, people started to come forward and participate in different activities. One in particular was the anti-War march in downtown San Francisco to protest the renewed bombing in northern Vietnam. This march was a particularly successful organizing event that brought out a lot of "advanced elements" closer to the JTC. During that time there was an on-going struggle against a lot of buildings threatened with destruction by redevelopment to pave the way to construct buildings

for corporations. This anti-redevelopment struggle was the basis for starting a mass organization called CANE (Committee Against Nihonmachi Evictions).

Many of the JTC cadres and "advanced elements" joined with the tenants to fight against the destruction of the Japanese community. As this struggle developed, some of the cadres from the JTC were pulled out of labor organizing to go into the CANE struggle and to give it leadership. At one time, the JTC had close to two dozen cadres involved in CANE.

The labor organizing at that time done by JTC centered in the garment industry. In this area, JTC and IWK were having joint meetings about strategy, direction and the development of a line in terms of organizing the workers, giving direction and focus to the struggle. I wasn't involved in that work and I don't know why it started to unravel. There was no clear sum-up of that particular period, or the errors that developed, but this was one of the points where the JTC shifted its focus to primarily doing its work in the Japanese community. The relationship with IWK began to come apart. At this time, IWK became engrossed in the overall U.S. revolutionary movement and its take on particular struggles in the world, and how IWK's theoretical, organizational and political line clashed with other organizations like the RCP (Revolutionary Communist Party), WVO (Workers Viewpoint Organization) and most of the centrists (a term then-used to characterize groups that tended to be less critical of the then-Soviet Union, and who disagreed with the Peoples' Republic of China's international line-editor).

JTC, for the most part, withdrew from most of these line struggles going on in the rest of the U.S. Marxist-Leninist movement, being waged in various coalitions. The JTC retreated into its mass organizing in Japan Town. By this time, even most of its line on international struggles was rehashed from Pacific News Service, the Guardian newspaper and some of it even from the bourgeois press.

This theoretical weakness and avoidance crippled its ties to many of the "advanced elements." The JTC wasn't able to lead these people in day-to-day mass organizing who were in the study groups that the JTC led. The JTC lost its ability to give overall revolutionary direction, getting bogged down in day-to-day things, in little victories and responding to the concessions given by the redevelopment agency. The redevelopment agency had a lot of room to give concessions. Although at the time, the JTC saw these concessions as little victories, they really turned out to be little sell-outs, token gestures given to the community.

A lot of these results revealed the JTC's theoretical weakness in being able to give overall revolutionary direction to both the struggles internal to the Japanese American community and also to the line struggle around various struggles going on in the rest of the world. Some of these questions centered on China's foreign policy, particularly at that time, around the struggle in Angola. Irwin Silber, a prominent New Left intellectual and writer, and longtime editor of the Guardian newspaper, would criticize and eventually condemn China's international line. There was much controversy and debate in the new M-L movement. The JTC had a difficult time being able to study and develop a position on all these debates. Some JTC cadres united with Silber and what I called these "centrist" lines (soft on condemning the Soviet Union as social-imperialist—"socialism in words, imperialism in deeds—and increasingly opposed to China, particularly its international positions).

This weakness came to a head about 1974 when a lot of the "advanced elements" began to work with IWK, which really isolated the JTC. People were leaving the JTC either for other groups, or burned and

turned off by the intensity and stridency of the M-L polemics. The JTC had become so isolated that one night, the few remaining people who still comprised the JTC drove up in the middle of the night, took all of their things from the building in which everybody shared offices, and left. From that day on, they weren't a force to reckon with in the Japanese American community. Nobody hardly ever saw them anymore. I believe that the JTC just faded out around late 1974 or sometime in 1975. Through the years, I hear about different people, about what they're doing, their alignment with various other groups like MLOC (Marxist-Leninist Organizing Committee) which joined the Communist Party USA. Those who did this seemed to just disappear from view.

Just before that period of time, I had left the organization in early 1974. I was turned off from the harshness of the internal struggle. People seemed to turn on one another, questioning people's commitment, making heavy demands and having a tone of self-righteousness and self-importance. It is my opinion that since the JTC leadership and group as a whole was unable and/or unwilling to deal with its lack of political and theoretical development that it turned inward and internal struggle became very dysfunctional. People started accusing one another of not being committed or sacrificing enough. Things got crazy and harsh. However, the JTC did leave a bold legacy in the San Francisco Japanese American community, from its opposition to the U.S.-Japan Treaty that allowed American military bases in Okinawa, to fighting redevelopment of the historic Nihonmachi community, to staging guerilla theater in the J-Town mall to educate the masses in the community. Despite its problems and implosion, in its short-lived history, it represented a revolutionary, organized expression among young Japanese American radicals to fight for the community as part of identifying with a larger, global anti-imperialist and revolutionary movement.

After two years in the Japan Town Collective, I left to join I Wor Kuen, which became the League of Revolutionary Struggle. In 1986 I eventually left the LRS due to a combination of reasons. My commitment was fading. I was dealing with the difficulties of raising kids, and I couldn't keep up with the demands of being in a cadre organization. I also no longer believed that a communist organization in the U.S. at that time was viable, but I think I mostly suffered from a loss of my idealism. Today, I still believe in many of the principles from that time, the need for a revolutionary core to give guidance and leadership to the mass organizations and struggles even though I personally may not be in a position or capable of participating. But I believe it's important to uphold the legacy of this period and to understand the lessons, the difficulties and problems.