



Written Statement For the Hearing Entitled, “Discrimination and Violence Against Asian Americans” on March 18, 2021 at 10:00 AM
Testimony from Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, AFL-CIO

Dear Chairman Cohen, Ranking Member Johnson, and Members of the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties of the House Committee on the Judiciary:

The Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, AFL-CIO (APALA) is pleased to submit this written statement to the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties of the U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary for the March 18, 2021 hearing titled “Discrimination and Violence Against Asian Americans.”

APALA was founded in 1992 as the first and only national organization of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) workers dedicated to advancing worker, immigrant and civil rights. With more than 2 million AAPIs working on the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis in healthcare, transportation, and service industries, our communities are harmed not only by exposure to the virus but also racialized hatred. Our members and 20 chapters across the country understand the urgency of the moment.

We thank the subcommittee for conducting this hearing to understand the alarming rise in discrimination, harrassment, and violence against Asian Americans in the wake of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and we welcome the opportunity to share the experiences of AAPI working people.

COVID-19 Motivated Anti-Asian Hate

Asian Americans have been facing a dual pandemic of COVID-19 and racism. Our communities have endured not only health disparities and economic hardships, but also racism and xenophobia from being unjustly scapegoated for the spread of the coronavirus. Anti-China rhetoric from all sides has caused dehumanization of Asian Americans. A recent Pew survey

shows that nearly one-third of Americans believe that China is an “enemy”¹ and such rhetoric in the federal government is used to justify hatred. The economic, gendered, and racialized oppression of specific Asian populations has increased multifold and hit our communities hard in a variety of ways. We have experienced tremendous grief, mourning lives lost to the virus and lives lost to white supremacist violence.

Attacks against Asian Americans began even before COVID-19 arrived in the United States and have not abated since. Over 3,700 hate crimes— and hate incidents against Asian Americans were reported to Stand Against Hatred (Asian Americans Advancing Justice|AAJC), OCA - Asian Pacific Advocates, and Stop AAPI Hate) from March 2020 to February 2021.² Of these 3,700 reported incidents, nearly 70% of victims were women. Equally concerning, civil rights violations, including workplace discrimination, account for 8.5% of the total incidents. Businesses are the primary site of discrimination (35.4%) putting many frontline workers at risk of violent incidents. In the past year, offenses legally classified as hate crimes against Asian Americans increased by 150% in major cities like Los Angeles and New York City. All these attacks, hate crimes or not, constitute an abhorrent pattern of violence that must end.

Just this week, six Asian women working at massage parlors in Atlanta, Georgia were killed by a white man operating on white supremacy, sexism, and sexualized violence. It is painfully clear that racist scaremongering and scapegoating is deadly, and it is harming the most vulnerable members of our Asian American communities—elders, women, immigrants, and working class people. These women were targeted at their workplace, in an industry that lacks access to OSHA and workplace protections, because their bodies were considered disposable.

Impact to Asian American Working People Across Industries

Since the start of the pandemic, our members have been experiencing an uptick in violence in their workplace. In Boston, Mass., many of our chapter members are home-care workers who speak primarily Toisanese (a Chinese dialect) and receive low wages. They have been physically assaulted for wearing a mask: one worker was hit by someone who yelled at her while she went to work to submit her time sheet. One worker in Harvard’s administrative office was accosted by someone who spit on her coat and said “Go back to China”. A staff member at the Chinese Progressive Association of Boston was conducting Census outreach, bringing fliers to elders’

¹ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, Christine Huang. *Pew Research Center*. March 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/03/04/most-americans-support-tough-stance-toward-china-on-human-rights-economic-issues/>

² *Stop AAPI Hate National Report*. Stop AAPI Hate. March 2021. <https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/210312-Stop-AAPI-Hate-National-Report-.pdf>

buildings in Chinatown when someone told her to “go back to China” and called her “China virus”.

In early 2020, Asian and Asian American health workers faced racism in the workplace from patients who did not want to be treated by a person of Asian descent. Data from National Nurses United (NNU) showed that 30% of the registered nurses who have died from COVID-19 are Filipino or Filipino American, despite such nurses only comprising 4% of the workforce.³

Teachers across the country, in public K-12 schools and universities alike, have faced racist slurs and taunts such as “kung flu” or “China virus” from students and parents. On top of that, many have been forced to return to in-person classes without PPE, without adequate social distancing, and without even being prioritized for the vaccine. They have been excluded from school reopening decisions and their voices have been silenced. Anti-Asian violence includes the interpersonal racism of slurs and includes systemic racism that treats education workers as disposable.

Our members have seen the same pattern across so many industries. Asian and Asian American essential workers in grocery stores and food distribution have experienced a lack of PPE, and racism from customers who refuse to follow mask-wearing rules (as well as state and local leadership that refused to create mask mandates). Childcare workers, transportation workers, postal workers, factory workers--Asian American workers have labored under oppressive conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic and racism. And even now, many Asian American workers cannot even access the vaccine because there are zero translations and zero language assistance for vaccine signups and distribution. These essential workers, with immigrants being some of the most vulnerable workers of all, put their lives on the line, and they are still being tossed aside.

Undoing Structural and Historical Racism Against Asian Americans

These attacks on Asian Americans are unjust and unacceptable, and they are not new. Our communities have experienced violence and racism—interpersonal, institutional, and structural—since the beginning of our stories in this nation. From the Chinese Exclusion Act and the murder of Vincent Chin to today, the labor of our communities has been perceived as a threat which emboldens white supremacists to enact interpersonal and state violence upon us. Asian Americans have been lynched in the U.S., faced white mob violence, and were forced into

³ *Sins of Omission: How Government Failures to Track Covid-19 Data Have Led to More Than 1,700 Health Care Worker Deaths and Jeopardize Public Health*. National Nurses United. September 2020. https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/sites/default/files/nnu/graphics/documents/0920_Covid19_SinsOfOmission_Data_Report.pdf

low-income areas to create Chinatowns because they were not permitted to live or work anywhere else. Such dehumanization goes back to more than a century ago when the Page Act of 1875 defined all Asian women as sexually deviant and therefore limited their mobility and freedom. The U.S. and institutional actors have long demonized and dehumanized Asian Americans, blaming them for everything from the COVID-19 and the economy. Immigration laws and U.S. imperialism forced people to leave their home countries in search of safety and security, only to face systemic racism that stripped them of their humanity and their family ties.

Our communities deserve safety and justice and demand an end to racism and white supremacy that endangers all of us. To this end, we ask that Congress not wait for another national emergency to have a conversation about violence against Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and other communities of color; many advocates and community members have been speaking out and need to be heard. We demand strong workplace protections for all workers including the right to form a union to protect against discrimination, harassment and violence of AAPIs and all communities of color.

APALA thanks the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties for bringing attention to harm that Asian American communities have been experiencing during this pandemic and for holding this hearing. We urge members of this subcommittee to bear in mind that racism and discrimination against Asian Americans did not begin with the start of the pandemic and without decisive, structural change, will persist long after the pandemic's end. Additionally, we hope you will continue to use the power of this subcommittee to address the specific needs of not only Asian Americans but also Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders and all other communities of color that have borne the brunt of the pandemic and of centuries of racism and violence.

Sincerely,

Alvina Yeh
Executive Director
Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, AFL-CIO