



Part of the Wolfentent

By Roger Kishi and Jenny Ahn with Mohamed Baksh, Bhupinder Sanghera, Jay Nair and Frank Saptel

THE ASIAN CANADIAN LABOUR ALLIANCE

ALWAYS THE ORGANIZER, WINNIE NG, DIRECTOR OF THE Canadian Labour Congress Ontario Region, introduced us to Roger Kishi and Jenny Ahn during this year's CLC convention in Vancouver. They had just helped formally launch the Asian Canadian Labour Alliance, and were both very excited. "Our Times should write about ACLA," said Ng, and we thought so, too, but we wanted to hear from the activists in their own voices. The following is based on several hours of discussions Our Times's editor, Lorraine Endicott, hosted with six members of ACLA's B.C. and Ontario chapters.

We wanted to get a personal as well as a political sense of the workers (who come from six different unions): what their background was, where they worked, how they got involved in their unions, why they become involved with the Asian-Canadian Labour Alliance — and why they think it is important.

As ACLA's flyer says, "Canadian culture and the face of Canada has been transformed forever." The last 30 years have seen an increase in the movement of people to Canada from Asia and many other parts of the world, and the great majority of these workers have no union. ACLA activists are sounding a wake-up call to their communities, and to the labour movement. It's time to get organized. - Our Times

JENNY AHN: I'm not from a union background and when I started working, I didn't really know what a union meant — except job security and equal pay. How do you feel working side-by-side with another worker who is doing the exact same job as you. knowing that you're going to make three or four bucks less an hour? That's what happened to me once, and it opened my eyes. I realized I needed to find a union job.

Being an activist in the community and doing labour stuff blend right into each other. Shortly after I was elected full-time president at Canadian Auto Workers Local 40, I was encouraged to take our union's workers of colour course. It really got me to understand anti-racism work and what the trade union movement is about, and how we can try pushing not only workers' rights, but human rights as well. That really got me really involved, and then, you know, you want to just jump into everything.

ROGER KISHI: I got involved through my local at St. Paul's Hospital, where I work as a security officer. (I'm a member of the Hospital Employees union/CUPE.) We respond to violent incidents in the hospital, which is right in the downtown core of Vancouver. It's the only hospital in the downtown core, and it gets almost all the ambulance calls from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. So, a big percentage of the patients have either mental health or substance-abuse problems. It's actually a pretty violent place to work.

I've worked there since 1987, but I only became active in the union around 1994, when the union started its equity and diversity initiative. I became interested in that and started to participate.

I'm not from a union background. Like a lot of union stewards who get involved (now I'm a steward), I had a problem in the workplace. I got a crappy job evaluation that I didn't believe was fair. I fought it, and it got overturned. Plus I started to become interested in health and safety issues, and I saw getting involved in the union as a way of being able to be involved in that. And now there's ACLA.

Kent Wong, the founding president of the Asia Pacific American Labour Alliance, spoke at the B.C. Federation of Labour's policy convention a few years ago. The BCFL had invited some Asian labour activists to meet Kent over dinner and talk about things that APALA had accomplished. Someone who had an invitation asked me, "Why don't you come?" So I did. There were only about eight or 10 Asian labour activists at that meeting. That was the beginning of it for us in B.C.

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I came from Punjab, India about 26 years ago, with a teaching degree. I'm Punjabi. I speak Hindi and Urdu. I sent my certificate for evaluation to the University of Toronto, but they didn't recognize my degree. So I started working in the factory. One year I worked in Toronto, in Downsview; then I moved to Brampton.

At one factory, there were just a few Punjabi women, and one Punjabi man. At that time, people were not familiar with the Sikh community, and they always laughed at his turban: "Look at that!" That kind of got to me.

I was brought up a strong woman. My grandmother was very strong, too. When I went home, I would think about work and the others laughing and say, "What is happening?" I also thought about how our women were on piece work and were treated differently. I didn't call it "discrimination" or "racism" at that time, because I didn't know the words. But it was.

I asked a Punjabi co-worker, "Why don't you complain?" She said, "If we complain, we get nowhere." Then I started to find out a little bit about unions.

I worked for five years in a furniture company, and then I started work in auto parts, and there was a union there: the Canadian Auto Workers. Back home I had heard a little bit about unions, but I didn't know much. I had been very involved in youth festivals. Here, I got involved in the CAW's education programs, and I met Raj Dhaliwal, the union's human rights director. I told him I had a teaching degree, and asked if I could help. He said, "I'm going to send you a letter when the courses start." I took four weeks paid education leave. After that, I never stopped.

As far as ACLA goes, Winnie Ng called me about three years ago, after attending the APALA convention in the United States, and said, "Bhupinder, we need to set up something over here." We wanted to connect with people all over Canada to start this ACLA thing (B.C. had already started). We set up some goals, and developed a leaflet. Then we tried to figure out how to build our membership.

In Puniabi communities, it's very hard to get women out. Our goal was to get all kinds of women together, from all the ethnic groups, to find out how we can bring them into leadership positions. We looked at the grassroots level, where women are active. So this is what we're doing: We are working with the communities to bring women into the labour movement, and we are working with women who are already in the labour movement to get them active. And for women who are already active, we are trying to help bring them into leadership roles. Because, as you see, we don't have too many women in leadership roles.

Any time I go somewhere, I count how many women we are together, as women — not just ethnic women. All women. Because that was my first union struggle: to get some women on the executive. My second goal was how to get ethnic groups in leadership roles. We are still very far behind. With the help of ACLA, I think we might get more ethnic women involved in the labour movement, and find a way to get more sisters in leadership roles.

I'm the only Punjabi woman in my union who is a national rep. I might be wrong, but I don't think there are any other Punjabi women on the national staff of any union in Canada. So this is my struggle, and it is dear to my heart. And through ACLA, I'm thinking we may want to broaden that goal. We want to develop this ACLA as a nice, big movement. We want to reach out to communities with the help of the labour movement.

BHUPINDER SANGHERA IS A STAFF REPRESENTATIVE OF THE ONTARIO COUNCIL OF THE UNION OF NEEDLETRADE INDUSTRIAL TEXTILE EMPLOYEES (UNITE).



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I've been active in trade union politics for almost 40 years, and come from a long line of activists in South

Africa, including my parents and grandparents. I met people in the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, a forerunner of the Asian Canadian Labour Alliance, when the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists was invited

to come to a conference set up by the American Federation of Labor. When we came back to Canada, we thought we should be organizing Asian Canadian trade unionists like ourselves, just like the CBTU did. Now, finally, it's come to fruition.

The Number 1 issue for us is to be recognized as part of the labour movement, and the Number 2 issue is to bring our needs forward so that the general labour movement understands and can assist us in promoting our issues on convention floors, and include us in the decision-making processes. We've been shut out for too long.

The main thrust of ACLA and CBTU is to try to get recognition in this sense: forget the tokenism days, when they said, "Okay, we'll give you a seat at the table, but we will set the agenda." We want to be full partners and make the decisions together. That's what "in solidarity" means.

The labour movement should take advantage of the organizing power within the communities. If you have a representative from a community Jay Nair talking to another representative, there will be a relationship. A third party

is always suspect. Now ACLA is coming forward, and the gay pride movement is doing the same thing. But labour hasn't arrived at the stage where they can accept us into the fold. They're always hierarchical; they want to keep control of the established system, the status quo. That is where we want to make inroads. By organizing ourselves within these communities, we will, one day, take charge. It may not be in my time, but maybe in my children's or my grandchildren's time.

JAY NAIR IS A LABOUR RELATIONS OFFICER WITH THE ONTARIO NURSES ASSOCIATION (ONA) AND A MEMBER OF THE BREWERY, GENERAL AND PROFESSIONAL WORKERS' UNION LOCAL 2.

to an APALA convention in San Francisco, as did Winnie Ng, the CLC Ontario Region's director. When they returned they went to the CLC's first conference for aboriginal workers and workers of colour, and they were saying, "Oh my god! There were 400 Asian trade union delegates! It was amazing!" It got us all excited.

A few of us in Toronto got talking, knowing about some of the work the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists does, and our lack of anything similar for Asian trade unionists. A few of us said. "Well, let's start building this thing!" We kept meeting, and asking questions like, "What do we want? Do we want to be a branch of APALA, like the CBTU Ontario Chapter has done?" We felt it would be important to not be exactly the same as APALA, because there are distinct differences for us in Canada — we have our own histories. We decided we would like to be similar to what APALA is, but to be our own entity. We called ourselves the Asian Canadian Labour Alliance. Anyone who selfidentifies can be a part of the organization.

We felt the need to build something like ACLA for the support, and also to be able to do outreach within our own communities. We started putting on events on a monthly basis, bringing out both rankand-file members and those already in leadership positions. We invited Kent Wong to Toronto for our launch. We had a great turnout of both union

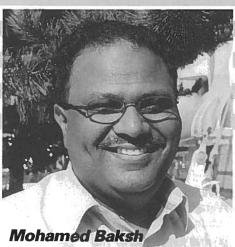
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JENNY AHN: In 1996, Gayle Nye, from B.C., went really enthusiastic. We thought it was fantastic that it wasn't just those who were directly involved in their unions who came. We've always held the door open for community activists. I think that's an integral part of what we want to keep doing.

> ROGER KISHI: I think one of the things that's really important is that we built the links to APALA right from the beginning. Although our own identity is important to us, we share common issues with APALA, including raising the profile, and improving the image, of labour in Asian communities. They've been very supportive. Kent Wong was at our first meeting in B.C.. He's been to Toronto. Guy Fujimori, past president of APALA, has met with us in Vancouver. The current president, Louisa Blue is going to be at the CLC's second conference for aboriginal workers and workers of colour, in Toronto this November. She's a registered nurse and a Filipino labour activist out of California.

One of the really core things with ACLA is to build the links between Asian labour activists. A lot of us are working in isolation. There aren't too many really active Asian labour activists in Canada. JENNY AHN: We want to teach our different communities about their rights, and to get them involved. Then, eventually, organize them. It's a lot of the outreach stuff. I guess there are Asian activists in Canada, but there's never been a formal link for us. **ROGER KISHI:** I think one of the big problems is the very negative perception, in Asian communities members and community activists. People were in Canada, of organized labour. You know: the

I didn't come from a union family. I just wanted to play a part in effecting some changes. Soon I began to do many things for the union, including helping in organizing campaigns, working on political action, and educating people about free trade. There was no turning back for me from then on, although at times it was difficult. At times, I didn't know where to turn to. But, I must say, I had a few mentors, including Fortunato Rao, a Steelworker staff representative who's retired now. I could always pick up the phone and seek guidance from him.



Without the support of my local union, I don't think I could have got to where I did. I was often out of the plant for a couple of months doing work for the union, but I still got re-elected. One of my beliefs is that you just can't turn your back on where you've come from — from your membership. You've always got to have that connection

At my plant at the time, almost 75 per cent of the members spoke Italian, and little or no English. I saw how the employer had an advantage over us, since most of the membership couldn't understand the contract, which was written in English. When we had the contract translated into Italian, lo and behold, people began to read and understand it, which really helped us in future collective bargaining. In fact, we had a strike for the first time in the history of the company, and that helped us win a pension plan. We had more grievances; we had more arbitrations; we had more issues to deal with — because people began to understand their rights. If workers can't read the collective agreement, it doesn't matter that you negotiated the best language.

Racism wasn't an issue in my local. I think the key is that we have to respect each other, no matter what our race, culture, religion or ethnicity. We all want to be treated

equally, and we should treat each other equally. That's key to building links.

One of the greatest joys for me, personally, is when we are able to negotiate anti-harassment or anti-discriminatory language with employers, language that includes training, on company time. Anytime we go into negotiations, it's on the table.

Every union has different ways of doing things, but why reinvent the wheel if one union has done it already? We can share, and I think it would be better for all of us. In Toronto, for instance, our union has done a lot of marvellous things, including publishing a calender every year, with ethnic holidays identified. We send it out to all our workplaces.

Last year, the Muslim holy month of Ramadan began on November 17, and about 30 Muslim members of ours in a workplace of about 275 were concerned about breaking their fast at sunset. They asked us to ask the company to provide a private space for them to break their fast, offer their prayers, and then go back to work. The company agreed, and it helped build everyone's morale. Those members have become happy members.

We're trying to reach out to other communities as well. For instance, we've been involved in the Caribana parade for a few years now. This year we had a float in the Pride parade (a decorated car, with members wearing Steelpride T-shirts, and hats that read "Steelworkers — Come out, come out, wherever you are"), and we sponsored a social at a nearby co-op. We want to make the union visible and to let people know that we want to work with them, and to help them with their cause.

About two years ago, Winnie Ng called me to see about getting a few active people together to jumpstart the Asian Canadian Labour Alliance. So, we had a gathering and started some discussions. We wanted to build upon what we had done alreadv.

Each ethnic group has their own issues. Talking to Sri Lankans about an issue is different than talking to a person from India, or Pakistan, or the Caribbean. Everyone's understanding is different; their needs are different; their wants are different. You have to engage them, and try to reach out to their leader. Sometimes what has happened to people in their respective countries makes them less likely to want to talk to you about their issues.

I think we've got a wonderful opportunity to promote and expand the movement, but we have to reach out to different ethnic groups. We're hoping we can build upon what the Asian activists have done in B.C. Also, we have the CBTU, which is like a sister organization. We can certainly learn from what they've done and try to build upon their success as well. The CLC is hosting its second aboriginal and workers of colour conference in Toronto in November. We're hoping we'll have a large number of Asian Canadians at that gathering. We hope the conference will be a turning point for us, and that we'll begin to really get some activism within this community.

MOHAMED BAKSH IS A STAFF REPRESENTATIVE WITH THE UNITED STEELWORKERS, IN TORONTO. HE IS THE ALTERNATE VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE CANADIAN LABOUR CONGRESS'S HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE.

I was born in Pakistan, and was there until I was 14 years old. When I was growing up, a strike meant a riot. It meant mob rule; it meant buses being overturned and burned, and shops being trashed and looted. So that was my impression, subconscious as it may have been, of the labour movement. A strike is not the same thing in Canada, but some of those old biases and prejudices stay, which may explain the lateness of

my involvement. Also, I never worked in a job that was unionized.

Still, although I didn't come from a labour or left background, I've always had a sense of justice and fairness. The one time I was fired from a job was for simply questioning my manager about the same thing he had called me on. It was a silly thing: I was late for work by 10 minutes, and he docked me for half an hour. That very day he asked me to stay late half an hour, for extra training, and I said, "Do I get overtime?" I was immediately fired.

I also come from a very tightly knit community which promotes community values like fairness — the Christian community in Pakistan. I think it's a universal value, and certainly I have brought that with me.

Why ACLA? I think it's important because there seems to be no voice for Canadians of Asian origin within the labour movement. What I especially like about ACLA is that it's not just focused on trade unionists. We try very, very hard to make links with the community. Labour has always Frank Saptel been a part of the community, but we seem to have lost — at least,

we're perceived to have lost — that connection. I'm also involved with the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, along with Jay Nair, and community-labour links are a very strong focus there as well. The two organizations have been working very closely together, and many of our efforts are jointly sponsored.

To many it doesn't seem, in general, that the trade union movement gives a good goddamn about visibleminority communities, whether they're unionized or not. Yes, there are community initiatives. But the trade union movement, in general, has been very bad at reaching out to those communities and saying, "You and us, we belong together."

I think ACLA's important; I think CBTU's important, and various other organizations. Now the danger is that some will say, "You're just another splinter group. Why are you subdividing even further?" Well, if you take subdivision to its logical conclusion — one cell subdividing and the next ones doing the same — you end up with a very intelligent human being; a complex organism that works very well together. I think that's what we're in the process of developing.

FRANK SAPTEL IS A NATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS REPRESENTATIVE WITH THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MACHINISTS AND AEROSPACE WORKERS (IAMAW).

"union bosses who take people out on strike." It's Asian communities were doing quite well, and prossupported through the mainstream media.

JENNY AHN: Or, depending on what country they're from, people think "it's a communist thing." We also have employers who are from the same community as the workers. They bring the different history and culture of whatever country here, and then exploit the workers, scaring them with the same tactics as before. Then there are some of the usual problems around language, and the need for people to see faces similar to theirs in the labour community, and for the organizer to look like them, too.

ROGER KISHI: Labour should take note: within the next five years, 25 per cent of the population of the Lower Mainland of B.C. is going to be of Asian descent, and most of those workers are not organized. And they are being exploited. We know there are sweatshops here on the Lower Mainland, just like there are in Toronto or Winnipeg, or anywhere else. New immigrants are being exploited.

JENNY AHN: I know specifically about the Korean

pering. Then, with globalization, a lot of the small businesses went belly-up. Now more people are living in poverty, but because of pride, and maybe some other cultural factors, they have been very quiet and are not getting help. If you ask some of them if they need help, they'll say, "No, I'm okay." They're really not, but they don't want to say so. We need to break through some of that. Also, maybe they don't know how to access the services because of language. Outreach needs to occur, because some of them are just sitting there, isolated.

Those who immigrated to Canada in the '70s, and did well with small businesses didn't perceive themselves as working-class. Now, all of a sudden, they see their social status — or class — isn't what they have always believed it to be. They have to come to grips with the reality that, "Holy shit, I'm in trouble!" And the loss of pride in having to say, "I need help, I don't have the money." That's my perception.

ROGER KISHI: My parents went through the community. Ten years ago in Toronto, some of the Japanese internment experience during the Second

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Jenny Ahn (second from the right), says that for her, ACLA is partly about "going back to my parents and that generation and trying to make them understand why I'm a trade unionist and why it's important to me." Second from the left: community activist and filmmaker Min Sook Lee, Right: Chris Ransaroop

World War. They were children at the time, but it had a direct effect on my parents' lives, and it's had guite a direct effect on my life as well. I don't have any of the language skills. My parents' families weren't allowed to return to the coast until 1949, long after the war was done. I was raised to fit into Canadian society. You know, that was what my parents wanted to do: give a good life to their children.

JENNY AHN: My parents said the same thing: "Fit in." We came here in the early '70s from Korea, and my folks said, "We want you to fit in and learn English." So I lost my Korean language skills. It wasn't until later in my teenage years that I wanted to learn it and took the time.

ROGER KISHI: I think the effort of Japanese Canadians to fit in, after all they'd been through, fed the stereotype of "polite Asians." There's the perception in North American culture, and in Canada in particular, that Asians are polite. That they "mind their manners."

JENNY AHN: They're not too aggressive.

ROGER KISHI: They don't rock the boat. Things like that. Jenny, I don't know what it's been like for you with your family, about you getting involved in the labour movement and speaking out.

JENNY AHN: Oh God!

ROGER KISHI: My mom sort of understands my activism because one of her first jobs was working as clerical staff for the IWA here in Vancouver. My dad didn't understand it until last year, when I ran for the NDP in the provincial election here in B.C. My dad always voted Liberal or Socred or Conservative: probably more Liberal. But my dad voted NDP last time. Well, he voted for me. But he actually came out to political functions. He's never been politically active before.

JENNY AHN: My parents were mortified at first that I was doing this stuff. Then they said, "Don't you think you should look for a real job?" They couldn't understand it. I started getting into arguments at family functions. All my cousins — everybody I grew up with — they're fairly right-wing and they work

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for these big corporations and they're all engineers and such. So we get into these political debates, and my poor mother's going, "Oh god, stop it, Jenny." I think they understand it a bit more now, but I haven't got them coming out to political events.

ROGER KISHI: In my case I think it became just sort of a family thing. You know: they had to support their son in his crazy endeavours. But you know, there is a rich labour history of Asians in Canada, and very few people know about it. Part of what we want to do with ACLA is to reclaim some of that history. It's there, but Asian labour history is separate from the mainstream labour movement's history because Asian workers, and other workers of colour, were excluded from the mainstream labour movement during the '20s and '30s and '40s. They had to do things on their own, and a lot of it was pretty radical.

One of the big things we try to do around antiracism and equity work is make sure that the issues are out front. If issues about racism, equity or harassment are all hidden behind doors, then they fade away and we don't move forward. We have to keep the issues out front and we have to keep talking about them.

also about being involved in our labour movement. We want the issue of equity to be out front, partly to say, "We are a part of this movement."

For me, ACLA is also about going back to my parents and that generation and trying to make them understand why I'm a trade unionist and why it's Glasgow, Nova Scotia B2H 5E2. E-mail: editor@ourtimes.ca

important to me. Also showing them that you don't forget your roots. A few years ago, I did some work with a Korean community group that brought an art exhibition to Toronto about the Korean "comfort women" — women who were forced by the Japanese government to serve as sex slaves for Japanese soldiers during the Second World War. The exhibition was called "A Quest for Justice," and my family thought, "Oh, this is great." I said, "But hang on a second; I do this kind of work in the community, but in conjunction with labour. This is how it's linked. It's about history, and also social justice issues. It's about how you're trying to change things. This is what labour gets involved with as well."

Jenny Ahn is full-time president of the Canadian Auto Workers Local 40, in Toronto. Roger Kishi is a member of the Hospital Employees Union/CUPE.

For more information about the Asian Canadian Labour Alliance, contact either the Ontario Chapter, or the B.C. Chapter, ACLA Ontario Chapter, 2 Kensington Avenue. Toronto, Ontario M5T 2J7. E-mail: acla@buzzardpress.com. Website: www.buzzardpress.com/acla. ACLA B.C. Chapter, JENNY AHN: And keeping the issues out front is c/o Gayle Nye, British Columbia Government and Service Employees Union (BCGEU), 2994 Douglas Street, Victoria B.C. V8T 4N4. E-mail: Gayle.Nye@bcgeu.ca.

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