



AANHPI in the Labor Movement

Competency

Educators apply lessons from Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander (AANHPI) labor organizing—including farmworkers, cannery workers, garment workers, nail salon workers and taxi drivers—to connect union history to the contemporary state of union organizing today, addressing specific issues within their own union or non-union setting as it pertains to AANHPI workers.

Key Method

The educator builds knowledge of AANHPI labor organizing history—including cross-racial solidarity, racism within unions, and contemporary workplace conditions—and applies that knowledge to listen to AANHPI colleagues, identify gaps in inclusion and representation, and develop concrete recommendations for their own school or workplace setting.

Method Components

Overview

Throughout U.S. history, the American economy has relied on the labor of workers who were often denied fair compensation and basic rights. Labor unions have been important for workers to gain leverage to establish livable wages, safe working conditions, job security, and equality in society as a whole. It's clear that labor unions are only as strong as the membership. With strategies to build support inside the union and with the public at large, workers have built collective power to leverage their demands.

Although AANHPI people have a long history in labor organizing, this history isn't well known and has been largely erased. In addition, the history of racism towards

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AANHPI workers within unions has divided and weakened the labor movement and spread racism towards AANHPI more broadly. It's the responsibility of educators to learn about this history and work against the erasure and neglect of AANHPI coworkers today.

Who is AANHPI?

AANHPI is an umbrella term covering a wide and diverse range of ethnic and cultural communities. These identities are self-identified and fluid. Below is a breakdown of communities often identified as AANHPI:

East Asian: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Mongolian, Taiwanese, Tibetan

Southeast Asian: Filipino, Vietnamese, Cambodian (Khmer), Thai, Laotian, Burmese (Myanmar), Indonesian, Malaysian, Singaporean, Hmong, Mien/Iu Mien

South Asian: Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Nepali, Bhutanese, Maldivian, Afghan

Central Asian: Kazakh, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen

Native Hawaiians: the Indigenous Polynesian people of the Hawaiian Islands (also called Kanaka Maoli)

Polynesian: Samoan, Tongan, Tahitian, Māori (New Zealand origin), Tokelauan, Niuean, Cook Islander

Micronesian: Chamorro (Guam/CNMI), Marshallese, Palauan, Chuukese, Pohnpeian, Kosraean, I-Kiribati

Melanesian: Fijian, Papua New Guinean, Solomon Islander, Ni-Vanuatu

The Role of Labor Unions

A labor union is a union of workers that negotiates collectively with an owner or employer to establish safe working conditions, improved living wages and benefits, and job security to ensure equality and fairness in the workplace. Depending on state laws, unions may engage in collective bargaining with management to establish a labor contract, or collective bargaining agreement (CBA), which is legally enforceable because it's a written contract between workers and their employer.

Labor unions have a long history of establishing better working conditions, pay, and benefits for workers across industries. Key legislation shaped that history: the 1935 Wagner Act required employers to meet at the bargaining table to establish a

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contract; the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act established the minimum wage; and the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) protects workers' rights to organize.

There are different types of unions. Trade or craft unions organize workers by skill or occupation. Industrial unions include everyone within an industry, such as the United Auto Workers or the United Steelworkers. There are also public- and private-sector unions. Teacher unions are public-sector unions and professional organizations.

Unions typically have dues that go toward paying for union staff, the governing body, and union operations. They're often hierarchical, consisting of elected officers such as a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and other representatives. Teacher unions are organized around local unions (for example, United Teachers Los Angeles) or chapters (AFT 1021) connected to a state affiliate (CTA, CFT, or both) and a national affiliate (the National Education Association [NEA] or American Federation of Teachers) or both. There is also an international teachers union, Education International, and the national AFL-CIO, which includes teachers.

NEA has had a significant influence in helping to set policy at the state and national levels. For the past 50 years, there has also been a grassroots movement of educators transforming teacher unions from the bottom up to be more democratic and inclusive as they respond to the needs of disenfranchised students.

Labor unions are only as strong as their membership, and when unions focus narrowly on wages and benefits while neglecting broader questions of fairness and equality, they've historically lost solidarity and membership.

AANHPI Labor Organizing History

Although AANHPI people have a long history in labor organizing, this history isn't well known and has largely been erased from mainstream accounts. It's the responsibility of educators to learn about this history and to work against the erasure and neglect of AANHPI colleagues and communities today.

AANHPI workers have been part of the American labor force since the 19th century. The economy of the United States relied heavily on immigrant labor from Asia and the Pacific—Chinese immigrants for the Transcontinental Railroad, and Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Korean workers on the sugar and pineapple plantations of Hawai'i and the farms of California's Central Valley. These workers organized repeatedly to improve their conditions despite significant legal and social barriers.

In 1867, Chinese railroad workers staged a strike demanding equal pay and an eight-hour workday—one of the earliest organized labor actions in the American West. Filipino farmworkers, led by figures including Larry Itliong and the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), were at the forefront of the 1965 Delano Grape Strike, the action that launched the United Farm Workers

(UFW). Itliong's role, and the broader contribution of Filipino workers to that movement, has often been overlooked in popular accounts.

In New York, garment workers—many of them Chinese and South Asian women—organized for safer conditions and fair wages. More recently, the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA), whose membership is largely South Asian and other immigrant workers, has become a significant example of organizing workers outside traditional union structures.

AANHPI workers have contributed to the American labor movement at every level—as organizers, strikers, and advocates—even as that contribution has been minimized or erased.

Racism Within Unions

An honest account of AANHPI labor history must also reckon with the history of racism within the labor movement itself. Understanding this history isn't about assigning blame; it's about building the awareness needed to prevent its repetition and to move toward genuine solidarity.

The "Chinese Must Go!" campaign was led by the Workingmen's Party of California in 1877, which was made up largely of Irish immigrants. Instead of uniting with Chinese workers, they chose to scapegoat them, claiming that Chinese workers were taking away their jobs. The campaign relied on racist propaganda depicting Chinese workers as unassimilable and threatening to white American values. The campaign led to widespread violence. Riots in San Francisco saw white vigilantes destroy and burn Chinese-owned businesses and homes. The 1885 Rock Springs massacre in Wyoming resulted in at least 28 Chinese deaths—one of many such events. Hundreds of Chinatowns were destroyed up and down the West Coast. Most Chinese people weren't allowed to rebuild or access their belongings and were expelled from their communities.

This all culminated in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese laborers from immigrating and eliminated citizenship for Chinese people already living in the United States. In California, Chinese Americans were disenfranchised—barred from voting, owning or leasing property, serving on juries, and testifying as witnesses in court.

Following the Chinese Exclusion Act, exclusionary tactics in the labor movement shifted targets, pivoting to demonize Japanese and Korean workers through newly formed exclusion leagues and union policies that blocked Asian workers from trades and land ownership.

Samuel Gompers, the first president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and a celebrated figure in labor history, supported the Chinese Exclusion Act and subsequent legislation that made it difficult for Asian people to immigrate and live

in the United States. Dividing workers along racial lines weakened the labor movement as a whole, benefiting employers at the expense of all workers.

Cross-Racial Solidarity

Alongside this history of exclusion, there are powerful examples of AANHPI workers building solidarity across racial and ethnic lines—and those examples offer a different model for what the labor movement can be. Hawai'i is the only state where workers of color came together and led unions to meet the needs of the workers.

In 1903, Japanese and Mexican farmworkers in Oxnard, California, formed the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association (JMLA) and successfully struck against the American Beet Sugar Company. When the AFL offered to charter the union on the condition that it exclude Japanese members, the Mexican members refused, choosing solidarity over recognition.

Filipino and Mexican farmworkers united in the 1965 Delano Grape Strike, building a multiracial coalition that sustained one of the most significant labor campaigns in American history. AANHPI labor activists, including the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA) and leaders such as Larry Itliong and May Chen, are working to change the legacy of racism within unions and build solidarity across all workers.

Contemporary Conditions for AANHPI Workers

The history covered in this microcredential isn't only the past; it shapes the conditions AANHPI workers and educators navigate today. Anti-Asian racism in unions hasn't disappeared. In recent years, some union leaders repeated anti-Asian rhetoric—including language blaming China for COVID-19—leaving many AANHPI workers feeling invisible and unsupported. Furthermore, systemic neglect and indifference to anti-Asian racism has left many AANHPI workers feeling invisible within the labor movement.

Racism is a significant factor in why unions lose power and strength, and it fuels larger patterns of discrimination against people of color. It's important to learn about this history in order to reconcile with the past and move forward to build solidarity with all workers across racial barriers.

Within educational settings specifically, AANHPI educators and staff often report feeling invisible—their histories unacknowledged in professional development, their voices underrepresented in decision-making, and their experiences of exclusion unaddressed. Centering AANHPI workers' experiences and confronting racism within unions and workplaces strengthens collective power for all workers, not just AANHPI communities.

Supporting Rationale and Research

Chow, Tiffany Y. "Privileged but Not in Power: How Asian American Tech Workers Use Racial Strategies to Deflect and Confront Race and Racism." *Qualitative Sociology*, vol. 46, no. 1, 10 Jan. 2023, pp. 129–152, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9830130/>, 10.1007/s11133-022-09527-1

Hester, Johanna, et al. "Asian American Workers and Unions: Current and Future Opportunities for Organizing Asian American and Pacific Islander Workers." *AAPJ Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community*, vol. 14, no. 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 78–96, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/984981w2>, 10.17953/nx.014.01.78.

"Japanese Exclusion and the American Labor Movement: 1900 To 1924 - Association for Asian Studies." Association for Asian Studies, 18 June 2023, <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/japanese-exclusion-and-the-american-labor-movement-1900-to-1924/>.

Kim, Marlene, "Organizing Asian Americans into Labor Unions" Trajectory of Civil and Political Engagement. https://www.aasc.ucla.edu/resources/policyreports/Trajectory_Civic_Political_Engagement/Trajectory_Ch11.pdf

Resources

Many of the resources below are drawn from the [Foundations and Futures](#) digital textbook, a free multimedia resource on Asian American history

History of AANHPI labor organizing

[Chinese Railroad Workers in North American Project - Stanford University](#)

[Labor & Activism of Filipino Farmworkers](#)

[Asian American and Pacific Islander Workers' Organizing](#)

[Labor Organizing: The New York Taxi Workers Alliance](#)

[Philip Vera Cruz](#)

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[Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander \(AANHPI\) Labor Leaders](#)

The Role of Labor Unions

[What is a Union](#)

[History of the National Education Association and the U.S. Labor Movement](#)

Racism Within Unions

[Boomtown, 1870s: 'The Chinese Must Go!'](#)

[AFL-CIO - Condemning and Combating Anti-Asian Racism](#)

Cross-Racial Solidarity

[Over More Than a Hundred Years of Farm Labor History, Japanese and Mexican Americans Have Been Both Allies and Adversaries](#)

[The History of Asian American Labor Activism Is Essential for Today's Students](#)

Contemporary Conditions for AANHPI Workers

[The Enduring Legacy of Asian American Pacific Islander Workers and Union Leaders](#)

[Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance \(APALA\)](#)

Submission Guidelines & Evaluation Criteria

To earn this microcredential, you must receive a passing score in Parts 1 and 3 and be proficient in all components in Part 2.

Part 1. Overview Questions (Provides Context)

300-500 words

Please don't include any information that will identify you to reviewers.

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Answer all of the following questions:

1. Describe your school or workplace setting—urban, suburban, or rural—and your role within it.
2. Prior to working on this microcredential, what did you know about labor organizing history and the role of unions in establishing workers' rights?
3. Why did you choose this microcredential, and what do you hope to do differently in your workplace or school community as a result?

Passing: Completely answers each of the three questions. Writing is organized and easy to understand.

Part 2. Work Examples/Artifacts/Evidence

To earn this microcredential, please submit the following three artifacts as evidence of your learning. See the rubric for the passing requirements.

Please don't include any information that will identify you or your colleagues to reviewers.

Artifact 1: Infographic on AANHPI Labor Organizing History

To build the knowledge base for this microcredential, you'll create an infographic that traces key moments in AANHPI labor organizing history and connects that history to the present. Before creating your infographic, review the resources listed under "History of AANHPI Labor Organizing" in the Resources section of this microcredential.

Your infographic must include:

- At least six key moments or movements in AANHPI labor organizing history, spanning at least three different AANHPI communities
- For each moment: the community involved, the industry or sector, the central struggle, and the outcome or legacy
- At least one example of cross-racial solidarity
- At least one example of how AANHPI workers have navigated exclusion from or discrimination within labor organizations

You may create your infographic using any tool you choose, such as Canva, Google Slides, or a drawing application. You may also create the infographic by hand and photograph or scan it, but please ensure your handwriting is legible. Combine your infographic and written connection into a single document for submission. The preferred format for submission is a PDF. If you choose to submit a link to an online document, please ensure that the sharing settings allow anyone with the link to view.

Artifact 2: Empathy Interviews with an AANHPI Colleague

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To connect the history you mapped in Artifact 1 to the present, you'll conduct an empathy interview with an AANHPI colleague about their experiences in a professional workplace setting. This doesn't need to be someone in your current school or district. If AANHPI colleagues are limited in your immediate workplace, you may reach out to someone in another school, district, or professional context.

Note: These interviews involve colleagues sharing personal and potentially sensitive experiences. Please assure your interviewees that their responses will be kept confidential and that no identifying information will appear in your submission.

Use the following questions for each interview:

1. How long have you worked in your field, and how would you describe your overall sense of belonging in your workplace community?
2. In your experience, how well are the histories and contributions of AANHPI people recognized in your workplace—whether in curriculum, professional development, or everyday conversations?
3. Do you feel your voice is heard and your perspective valued when decisions are made in your workplace? Can you share a specific example?
4. Have you experienced or witnessed moments where AANHPI colleagues felt excluded, overlooked, or unsupported? What were the circumstances?
5. What do you wish your colleagues or leadership better understood about your experience as an AANHPI professional?
6. What is one change—large or small—that would make your workplace feel more inclusive and affirming for AANHPI colleagues?
7. Workers in many industries have historically organized collectively to advocate for better conditions and greater equity. Do you feel that AANHPI professionals and their concerns are well represented in those kinds of collective efforts—whether through a union, a professional organization, or other advocacy structures—in your workplace or field? Why or why not?

Use the provided template and record your interviewee's responses during each conversation. Template: [Interview Questions Template](#)

Once you've completed the interview, write a summary of your findings in two to three paragraphs. Your summary should capture the key themes that emerged, note any moments that surprised you or challenged your assumptions, and reflect briefly on what you heard suggests about the contemporary experience of AANHPI colleagues in your professional setting. You'll draw on this summary in Artifact 3.

The preferred format for submission is a PDF. If you choose to submit a link to an online document, please ensure that the sharing settings allow anyone with the link to view.

Please don't include any information that will identify you or your colleagues to reviewers.

Artifact 3: Presentation on Uplifting AANHPI Voices

Drawing on the historical knowledge you built in Artifact 1 and the interview findings from Artifact 2, you'll create a presentation of at least 15 slides (not including the title slide) for uplifting AANHPI voices in your workplace. Before you begin, identify your intended audience. Your presentation should be written as if it could be genuinely delivered to that audience. Your audience might be:

- Your local union leadership or chapter board
- Your school or district administration
- Your school board
- A professional organization you belong to

Name your intended audience on your opening slide. Your presentation must include:

- A brief summary of your interview findings that establishes the contemporary need
- At least two concrete recommendations for how your audience could better support, include, and uplift AANHPI colleagues
- At least one explicit connection between a historical AANHPI labor struggle and the contemporary conditions your interviews surfaced
- A closing slide that makes the case for why this work matters now
- Facilitator notes that will help you deliver the presentation confidently and lead discussion
- A minimum of 15 slides

You may create your presentation using any tool you choose. The preferred format for submission is a PDF. If you choose to submit a link to an online document, please ensure that the sharing settings allow anyone with the link to view.

Please don't include any information that will identify you or your colleagues to reviewers.

Part 2. Rubric

	Proficient	Basic	Developing
Artifact 1: Infographic on AANHPI Labor Organizing History	The infographic includes at least six key moments or movements spanning at least three AANHPI communities. Each moment identifies the community involved, the industry or sector, the central struggle, and the outcome or legacy. The infographic includes at least one example of cross-racial solidarity and addresses the racism-within-unions thread.	The infographic includes at least six moments but with limited diversity across communities, or one or more moments are missing required elements. Cross-racial solidarity or racism-within-unions may be present but underdeveloped.	Fewer than six moments are included and/or fewer than three AANHPI communities are represented. Required elements are missing from most entries, and cross-racial solidarity or racism-within-unions is not clearly addressed.
Artifact 2: Empathy Interviews with AANHPI Colleagues	Interview template is submitted. The written summary of two to three paragraphs captures key themes that emerged, notes any moments of surprise or challenged assumptions, and reflects on what the findings suggest about the contemporary experience of AANHPI colleagues in the	Interview template is submitted. The written summary is present but addresses only one or two of the three required elements: patterns or themes, moments of surprise or challenged assumptions, or reflection on contemporary experience.	Interview template isn't submitted or is incomplete. The written summary is absent or doesn't address the interview findings.

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	educator's professional setting.		
Artifact 3: Presentation on Uplifting AANHPI Voices	The intended audience is named on the opening slide. The presentation is at least 15 slides long, not including the title slide, includes a summary of interview findings, at least two concrete recommendations, at least one explicit connection between a historical AANHPI labor struggle and the contemporary conditions surfaced in the interviews, and a closing slide making the case for why this work matters. Facilitator notes are present.	The intended audience is named. Most required elements are present but one is missing or underdeveloped. Facilitator notes are present.	The intended audience isn't named. Multiple required elements are missing. Facilitator notes are absent.

Part 3 Reflection

400-500 words

Use the word count as a guide to write a personal reflection about your work on this microcredential. For tips on writing a strong reflection, review the following resource:

[How Do I Write a Good Personal Reflection?](#)

Answer all of the following questions:

- What did you learn about AANHPI labor organizing history that surprised you or shifted your thinking?
- What patterns emerged from your empathy interviews, and what do they suggest about the contemporary experience of AANHPI colleagues in your setting?
- How has completing this microcredential changed how you think about your role in creating more inclusive and affirming conditions for AANHPI colleagues—whether through a union, a professional organization, or your own workplace?
- What are your plans to extend this learning or act on the recommendations you developed in your presentation?

Passing: The educator reflects on each question with specific details drawn from their work on the artifacts. Writing is organized and easy to understand.

Please do not include any information that will make you identifiable to your reviewers.