

# Beyond Atlanta: Contextualizing Anti-Asian Hate and Violence



During the pandemic, hate crimes against Asian Americans have increased by 150 percent, ranging from people being pushed and spat on, to brutal physical attacks. The murder of several people in Atlanta, most of them

Asian women, by a lone white gunman in March was the most extreme example of the hatred that many Asians, in particular East and Southeast Asians, have been facing. In fact, even as Covid-19 restrictions are being lifted, many Asian Americans plan on staying inside as much as possible, fearing being attacked if they're too publicly visible.

Yet even with the increase in attention to anti-Asian racism, understanding of the problem is partial. "We must broaden the contours of what is anti-Asian violence to also include Asian workers being exploited, or Asian women being sexually attacked, a pattern of violence of misogyny and oppression linked to colonialism and white supremacy," Scott Kurashige, professor of American and Ethnic Studies at the University of Washington Bothell explains.

We need to continue to develop campaigns based on political critique that recognizes the broad forms of oppression that the majority have been made to endure.

## THE STATE OF ASIAN AMERICA

Janelle Wong, a professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland who writes extensively on Asian American politics, race, and religion is also a senior

researcher at *AAPI-Data* which gathers critical survey data on Asian and Pacific Islander Americans. Wong observes data paints a more accurate picture of Asian Americans, countering misperceptions. For instance, one could argue Asian Americans are too ethnically and linguistically diverse to work together. Instead, as surveys reveal, a growing number across Asian and Pacific Islander subgroups share similar political views, often leaning progressive on critical issues.

Wang explained “Despite all their differences, this group of diverse people is turning Democrat over time” and share “a remarkable level of consensus” about the government’s role in everyday life. The majority of Asian Americans, regardless of partisanship, endorse a pretty strong government role in terms of the environment, healthcare, gun control and to some extent, redistributive economic policies.”

One could connect this convergence on issues to the shared material conditions that many Asian and Pacific Islanders in the U.S. have been facing over the years, with a significant and growing number trapped in low-wage work, while also dealing with soaring costs of living. Many Asian and Pacific Islander arrive here with very little, to a country they find offers minimal opportunity for social mobility. The anxieties of living under neoliberal capitalism, in which the “entrepreneur” is elevated above the average worker in policy and narrative, has pushed many Asian and Pacific Islander Americans to support progressive politicians, such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez. Another shared reality among Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, regardless of subgroup/ethnicity, has been domestic violence and sexual assault. According to a report compiled by *AAPI-DATA*, domestic violence and sexual assault for all Asian women hover at around 20%, which is high considering how underreported domestic and sexual violence situations are. As high as 56% of Filipinas and 64% of Indian and Pakistani women have said they’ve experienced sexual violence from their intimate

partners. Since the pandemic, rates of abuse have drastically increased, with many survivors left with no choice but to remain at home with their abusers.

So, what should this mean in light of the recent tragedy in Atlanta and the subsequent protests?

First, to address the various harm and injustices that most Asian and Pacific Islanders in the U.S. face, we need to develop campaigns that aren't solely focused on hate crime legislation. If movements are truly interested in creating environments in which most Asians feel safe and able to push back against reactionary forces, they must fight for policies such as universal housing and healthcare, which would make it much easier for survivors to leave abusive relationships. They must fight for more protections for workers and for the right for workers to organize for what they need, including higher wages as well as the right to determine the conditions at their workplace. After all, the women who were murdered in Atlanta were workers themselves, caught in an industry that rarely thinks about their safety and concerns.

Alvina Yeh, Executive Director at the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), a constituency group under the AFL-CIO labor umbrella, observes "The issue is not just about hate" because it's also about "misogyny, it's about immigration, it's about workplace status and workplace issues."

More Asian and Pacific Islanders in the U.S. should be drawn into critical fights over power, alongside other racial and ethnic groups. This is not to say that most Asians now, given their positions as workers in a country that devalues working people and what we need, are budding socialists or even social democrats, or somehow, understand the connections between capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy. Crisis and deteriorating living and working conditions can, as Gramsci argued generations ago, push people to think differently about the status quo and about themselves. However, unless their

anger and frustration are tapped in organizing, they can hold onto ideas and beliefs that are counterproductive, which we see with some Asian Americans clinging onto anti-Black racism and other forms of bigotry that contradict building the solidarity that is necessary to win power. Still, as evidenced in the data, growing numbers of Asian and Pacific Islanders in the U.S. can be organized to battle against business interests and those standing in the way of progressive and socialist change, if organizers and organizations are willing to do the work.

### **THE POLITICAL HORIZON**

Founded in 1992, APALA was created in order for Asian and Pacific Islander workers to be heard above the din of anti-immigrant and anti-Asian sentiment in mainstream labor politics and as a vehicle for Asian and Pacific Islander workers in the U.S. to be able to fight for what they needed materially, which often do not get reflected in mainstream Asian American politics. Issues of class and gender are often left out of discussions about policy and interests of Asian Americans, as usually upwardly mobile Asian Americans, or political celebrities such as Andrew Yang, take up space at rallies and protests and consequently, restrict the discussion of what is needed for Asian Americans to such things as supporting Asian owned businesses, or the desire to support having more police in neighborhoods.

Asian and Pacific Islanders across the U.S. who are working face declining working and living conditions. Many who are women, like those murdered in Atlanta, work in occupations such as the massage parlor industry, that offer few workplace protections and overall, do not consider the well-being of its workers. According to a recent *New York Times* piece, one of the victims of the shooting worked long hours at the massage parlor, and according to their sons, barely had time to relax or have a life apart from working. We need a multi-level approach/strategy that no longer leaves behind the concerns

and interests of women working in massage parlors, women working as home healthcare workers, and as domestic household labor. "You can't treat any of these issues in a silo," Yeh explained. "We have to be able to be nuanced and complex and talk about many issues all at the same time."

Since the murders in Atlanta, the national leadership at APALA has been holding townhall discussions online for its membership across 20 chapters throughout the country on the issue of anti-Asian racism, as well as discussions over forging solidarity across communities of color, as well as providing toolkits for members to rely on when seeking to connect the fight for labor with the fight for racial justice at their own workplaces and unions. There are also other prominent Asian American and Asian organizations, like Communities Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV) and Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), and 18MR, that seek to organize for what most Asians need, as well as cultivate solidarity and a broader understanding of politics among Asian Americans that pushes against the more conservative and even more liberal perspectives on how to address issues impacting Asian America.

What Asians need is systemic changes to how our economy functions in relation to working people as well as policies that address issues like anti-Asian racism, without providing police more resources. To achieve any of this, however, will require solidarity between Asian Americans and other communities of color. "That's why we need unity, that if we don't stop the neo-fascist elements, they're going to take away and wipe out the imperfect forms of democratic representation we have now," Kurashige warned. "If we want to create a better system than exists now, we need forms of solidarity that recognize unique forms of oppression that indigenous peoples and African Americans have faced, but that also find some way to see these systems of oppression as interconnected and therefore, if we want to overcome them, we need to make those critical connections across community,

across these racial and ethnic boundaries.”

Another dimension of this struggle is confronting U.S. foreign policy and the rhetoric surrounding it. Currently, Biden has continued to lean into anti-China rhetoric that the Trump administration also helped spread, especially during Covid-19. U.S. foreign policy remains destructive for the rest of the world and often situates countries like China as an existential threat to the world. Such rhetoric contributes to painting large groups of people, especially Asians, as foreigners, regardless of their actual history in the U.S., and as pawns of the countries that the U.S. is now competing against or bombing.

As Tobita Chow, director of Justice is Global, argues ““When a non-white country is a supposed threat of enemy to the U.S., inevitably people from there or perceived to be from there are also perceived to be threats to American people.” The belligerent rhetoric against China reinforces the perspective among non-Asians and even among some Asians as well that the Chinese people are an international threat that must be stopped. The rhetoric parallels the increase in hate crimes, with examples of non-Asians literally yelling, “Fuck China” as they proceed to harass and intimidate East Asian Americans.

As APALA argues, more funding for police will not change the inequities and vulnerabilities that many Asians in the U.S. are facing, whether as workers, as women, as people lacking critical resources. Instead of more law enforcement patrolling, APALA believes in having a more transformative justice-oriented response, which includes training bystanders on how to intervene when people are being harassed as well as funding for mental health services and other resources that victims of hate crimes would need. Through its toolkits and townhalls and work on the ground that chapters are doing, such as mutual aid, APALA is pushing for people to identify how the problem in the U.S. of racism and exploitation is foundational.

“The violence of poverty, of deportation, of incarceration is all tied together. It is all related to a false sense of economic scarcity,” said Yeh, talking about how people are led to believe that there aren’t enough resources for everyone all the while major business are growing richer, and social programs remain lean.

Neoliberal politicians, corporate interests, celebrity capitalists like Yang, all want to promote an idea of Asian American politics that aligns with their own pro-capitalist, pro-American Dream narratives that refuse to tackle core economic and political issues. Instead, what we must have are campaigns seeking to fight against capital, to fight against patriarchy at the workplace and in the home, and that believe in the strategic and moral necessity of solidarity.

“We have to be willing to put in the work in, to have these conversations with other communities of color,” Yeh said.