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“J-Town Collective”

The J-Town Collective (JTC) is a revolutionary Japanese-American organization that has been working in San Francisco’s Japanese community since June ’71. JTC’s activities include: a bookstore offering revolutionary literature from all over the world, a film program focusing on people’s struggles, active participation in the Asian Women’s Health Team, and high school organizing at Washington High. The organ of the JTC is “New Dawn.” “New Dawn” offers a wide range of articles—from liberation movements in Africa to struggles in Asian communities.

The following is an interview with JTC.

GT: How was the J-Town Collective formed? What was the main impetus that led everyone to come together initially?

JTC: Most of us were working in a social service organization at the time and as our political consciousness grew, we were faced with more and more conflicts as time went on.

GT: What kind of “conflicts” were these?

JTC: There were many internal contradictions within the organization then and there was no mechanism to deal with them. The basic contradiction was that a group of us had become increasingly frustrated with the inability of the organization to respond to the real needs of the community. The programs that were set up—pottery workshop, photo workshop, summer camp, etc.—did not make people understand better why this society was so oppressive. On a more individual level, this meant that the organization could not and did not lead people to see the source of their frustration and of the feeling of meaninglessness that they feel. People walked out frustrated. It was just a service organization, a “blind service” organization and no more.

GT: Were there any struggles within the organization to change its orientation?

JTC: We tried and tried to initiate struggle, but we were never able to get very far. The concept of struggle was alien to them as it was to us at one time, but more importantly, they were unwilling to struggle. They were content with the way things were going (except for a few minor things) and felt that teaching people photography and pottery was the way to liberation.

GT: So how did the J-Town Collective grow out of this group?

JTC: As I said before, we began to see more and more inadequacies of an organization like that and our frustration mounted as a result. At the same time we wanted answers to things that were irrational but which we were taught to accept as natural part of life. Answers to questions like—Why are our teachers racist? Why do we have to “prove” ourselves before we can gain acceptance in this society? Why do most men have to feel superior to women? Why are most third world people poor? And perhaps the most irrational of all—What was the force that

confiscated everything that our parents and grandparents slaved so hard to get and sent them hundreds of miles away to the desert to live in barracks surrounded by barb-wire?

So out of disillusionment with the organization and the burning desire to know the answers to such questions as these, we decided to form a “work collective.”

GT: What was the “work collective” and how does it differ from what the JTC is like now?

JTC: At that time we were all pretty consumed as to exactly what kind of organization the Japanese-American community needed. That is, we weren't sure how the needs of the community could best be met. Because of this state of uncertainty, the “work collective” was just mainly a study group for the first two months or so. We read Chairman Mao's writings and learned much about what “serving the people” really meant and about how a genuine Marxist-Leninist organization differs from all others.

GT: You said that the “work collective” was a study group. How did this study group turn into an active revolutionary organization?

JTC: Although all the studying we did helped us reach a clearer perspective, we soon reached the point when more knowledge would have to come from social practice.

GT: What kind of work did JTC begin doing in the Japanese community?

JTC: The work that JTC did at the beginning must be looked at within the context of the strategies that many political organizations were putting into practice at the time. During that period, newly-formed third world revolutionary organizations were all sort of looking towards the Black Panther Party for ideological guidance. Being a very young organization then, the JTC too turned to BPP for ideas. If you look at the first issue of “New Dawn” you will see that along with the BPP idea of “survival program,” we too were offering legal services, health care, a prison program, etc. As you can see, like the Panthers, and other Third World organizations at the time, we were trying to organize the “lumpen-proletariat” too.

GT: How and why did the JTC begin to move away from this approach?

JTC: It didn't take long for us to see that although there were “lumpen-proletariat” in the community, they were a very, very small minority. The vast majority of people in the Japanese community, being mainly white collar workers (secretaries, clerks, lower levels of management), shopkeepers, are able to provide [sic] for their basic needs and thus, did not need the services that were offered. However, we found that people were frustrated, unhappy, and more importantly, they did not feel that life had much meaning beyond maintaining their livelihood. Like all working people in a capitalist society, they feel alienated; working as “hired help,” they have no control over the overall function of the company, factory, or office in which they are just a “cog.” Moreover, our people, like all non-whites in this country suffer the added oppression of racism. Although concrete extensions of racism—like job discrimination—are less blatant in big cities like San Francisco, nevertheless racism is still at work in a very subtle insidious way.

GT: What do you mean by “subtle” and “insidious”? What form does racism against Japanese take then?

JTC: O.K. Take for instance our parents, the nissei generation. They were taught ever since they were young that America was truly a democratic country where equality, fair play, etc. was in operation. What happened when they were in their late teens and early twenties? They, along with their parents, the Issei, who had toiled long and hard as farm laborers, were forcibly dragged from their homes into the desert because they were “potential spies” of the Japanese government. The Nissei, who had tried hard to assimilate by adopting Anglo culture, custom, and habits were suddenly slapped in the face and told they were traitors because they were yellow. Although it later became clear that many capitalist politicians and businessmen were behind the move to send Japanese-Americans to concentration camps so that they could benefit from it both economically and politically, the fact still remains that had we been white, it would not have happened. Germans were holding open meetings announcing their support for Hitler at the same time, but they were not touched at all.

GT: So what was the result of this? I mean what effect did the concentration camp experience have on the Japanese people and how has it affected the situation at the present?

JTC: Some Japanese did protest this outrageous act and renounced their American citizenship, but the majority were so overwhelmed and frightened by it all they remained passive—on the surface at least. When they finally left the camps, they tried their best to forget about it and again tried their best to assimilate by trying to be as American as they can. What I am trying to say is that this has been the price of American citizenship to the Japanese people: Repressing their sense of indignation and putting forth a cheerful, all-American face to show that they are not angry, but patriotic, grateful Americans. This attitude they’ve transmitting to us, the sansei (third) generation and we are just beginning to see how humiliating it is to be in such a position. How the pride and spirit of our people have been taken away by the ruling class of this capitalist society over a long period of time.

GT: The JTC is a revolutionary organization, isn’t it? Why is revolution the only solution?

JTC: As I said before, the Japanese people in this country face two interrelated forms of oppression: The general oppression that all working people (both white collar and blue collar, small shopkeepers) face, irregardless of race, face in a situation where their livelihood depends on whether or not they can fit in as cogs in a machine over which they themselves have no control. Thus, the majority of people in this country (being part of the working force) have no control over the general direction that the various institutions in their society are taking. This oppression is of course the basic one that almost everyone, besides the ruling class, feels in a capitalist society.

The second type of oppression that the Japanese people suffer from is racism, in the form that I have explained above. Racism is something that all non-white suffer under in this society. Although capitalism thrives on and reinforces racism as it does other irrationalities like male chauvinism, we have to realize that because capitalist domination by the Western Anglo nations has gone on for so long that racist stereotypes are deeply imbedded in everyone’s minds. The

tendency to see white as superior and colored as inferior is very deep and pervasive in American society. Thus, although the overthrow of this capitalist society to end general oppression is our basic task, we must not overlook how deeply racist feelings have been imbedded in every one of us.

JTC is at present only working in the Japanese community because we feel that much educational work will have to be done among our own people so that we can begin to see the source of our frustration and feeling of alienation. We are not “closed door” organization as we welcome revolutionary comrades of all nationalities to join us in our effort to bring the Japanese community into the revolutionary movement. However, at this time, because of the unique role racism has played in American history, It [sic] will be more difficult for a comrade from a different ethnic background to understand the myriad of problems in the Japanese community and in particular, the effect that racist oppression has had on the Japanese people.

GT: What kind of programs does JTC have now?

JTC: As I have mentioned before, the main form of oppression that our people feel now is psychological oppression. Still passive, afraid to speak up, still attempting to assimilate, to blend in with Anglo society. And along with this psychological oppression that racism has produced among our people, there is the general psychological oppression and alienation that all working people feel—frustrated at and alienated from a society over which they have little control, their lives are little more than 9:00 to 6:00 shifts at the office, factory or store during which they write, type, make or sell things under the direction of a “boss” who is in turn under the direction of a bigger “boss” and so on. The end product of their labor is utilized in a form that they cannot control. Based upon this realization, JTC is mainly providing educational programs that will provide the people with an understanding of their situation together with information about radically different societies, like socialist China, in which problems like ours no longer exist.

There are four programs altogether that JTC is actively engaged in. The first two, the Asian Women’s Health Team and High School organizing, are programs in which JTC participates, but are not the sponsors. The Asian Women’s Health Team is a democratically run organization that is in the process of investigating the health needs of Asian women. In [sic] the area of High School organizing, JTC works closely with Asian Alliance at Washington High in sponsoring film showings, field trips, etc. in an attempt to expose high school students to examples of people’s struggles. The two programs that are directly sponsored by the JTC are the film program and the publication of “New Dawn.” The film program has shown two films in the community so far. The first showing was held around the end of January and it was a premier showing of “Sanrizuka: The Peasants of the Second Fortress.” This was a documentary about the protracted struggles of the peasants of Sanrizuka in Japan against the government and the imperialist who were trying to take over their land so that an airport could be constructed. In their struggle, they were joined by many revolutionary students and workers. We chose this film because it illustrated two very important points:

- (1) that the enemy (in this case being the imperialist Sato government and its collaborators) can only be held back through united militant struggle. This shows the truth of Chairman Mao’s saying that: “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”

- (2) that a truly revolutionary struggle transcends selfish interests. At first the peasants were fighting merely for the preservation of their land. As the struggle progressed, they began to see that it wasn't just their own land that was a stake, but the principle of the people's right in opposing a ruthless government that would sacrifice the people's welfare in order to obtain more wealth for the ruling class. As their understanding deepened, so did their commitment and dedication to fight to the very end.

Many community people—old, young, foreign-born and American-born—came to the showing. Their enthusiasm was so great that many stayed after the showing ended to talk to us about how they truly admired the peasants for their courage in the face of such ruthless opposition.

The second film that we showed was “The Red Detachment of Women,” a revolutionary dance drama that shows what liberation meant for the Chinese people by showing how one girl was freed from the chains of feudal despotism. Again, the turn-out for this film was amazing. There must have been at least 100 to 150 people in the audience.

Like our film program, our newspaper “New Dawn” also serves the purpose of informing the people of revolutionary struggles, past and present, of oppressed people all over the world. At the same time, we are also attempting to present important events in the history of Japanese Americans in a new light. In this way, we hope to help our people reach a deeper understanding of their past heritage and then present dilemmas. And of course, along with that, the need for a radically different kind of society, a socialist society where true freedom and equality will reign.

GT: From your description of the enthusiasm of the community people that came to your film showings, it seems that the consciousness of the Japanese people is really beginning to rise.

JTC: That's very true. Aside from us, there has been a rapid proliferation of community organizations in the Japanese communities over the past two years. Although these organizations are mainly social service-oriented, they do not reflect a growing awareness among the people that they do not have an identity separate from the stereotype image that has been forced upon them. The Japanese people, through these organizations, are beginning to come together socially if not politically. These organizations, as I mentioned in the first part of the interview, do not yet go beyond service programs and cannot, at present, bring the people to a higher level of political consciousness, but their very existence and growth demonstrates the rising of a community consciousness.

GT: From what you have said, it appears that it is just a matter of time for the Japanese people to become a conscious revolutionary force.

JTC: Yes, I would say that. As revolution is the main trend in the world, the fall of American imperialism and the rise of the working peoples of the world are both inevitable.