



## Campesina's journey

1982

by Yolanda Alaniz

I was raised in Eastern Washington's Yakima Valley, a fertile, rich, and beautiful farming region known to Chicanos as the Little Mississippi of the Northwest because of the local racism against Chicanos.

My family were *campesinos*—migrant farmworkers—who settled in Sunnyside, the heart of the region. Most people there are Chicano.

My mother worked in the fields to support her five kids. I had to work in the fields before and after school every day, plus weekends from sunup to sundown, to help the family. I remember the poverty: the farm labor camps where we lived had no electricity or running water, and our community outhouse was in the center of the camp.

At school, our culture and language were denied us. We were not allowed to learn Chicano history. Our teachers favored the white students and fanned their racism against us. I'll never forget white kids laughing at me for bringing *tortillas con papas* for lunch and for wearing secondhand clothes and shoes.

Our teachers weren't there to educate, but to funnel all Chicanos into relatively unskilled jobs. They told me to forget about college and to seek jobs where I could use my hands, which I was "used to."

By the time I graduated from high school, only a handful of Chicanos were left. The rest had been forced to

drop out and go to work, were expelled, or had been so discouraged by racism that they quit.

As I walked down the aisle to get my diploma, I felt so proud of myself and *mi mamá*, who had pushed me to finish school. Only two out of the seven children and step-children in my family graduated from high school. And I was the only one to finish college.

### *La raza unida*

In September 1969, I moved to Seattle to attend the University of Washington under the Equal Opportunity Program, which allowed minority and poor students to make up college-prep deficiencies, and provided federal loans and scholarships.

It was a very good year in which to begin my higher education. The Chicano movement had erupted with a vengeance in the wake of the Black civil rights struggles and amid the protests against the Vietnam War.

Campus was *hot* with political activity. I was very quickly transformed from a “Mexican American” into a *Chicana* political activist, like so many others.

It was Chicanos against the world!

We needed everything! We demanded everything! And we had a *right* to everything!

Our number one enemy was the gringo, just like back home. Our allies were ourselves. Our tactics were militant: demonstrate, rally, take the building! We demanded Chicano studies, Chicano classes, radical professors, more financial aid, no sellouts. We went off campus, took to the streets, organized contingents in the antiwar demos.

We wanted it all. And I loved every minute of it!

### *Race is primary?*

The time was right for winning some demands. But fights soon broke out among the different peoples of color over who was going to get a bigger share of the pie.

It took us awhile to realize we weren't each other's

enemies. The gringo was. So we formed alliances with one another. Still, we Chicanos always held that the Chicano struggle was foremost. Race was the primary issue. And Chicano culture, regardless of class or political differences, was the basis of our unity and strength. Our slogan was *Chicano Power!*

For many, this was a self-affirming expression of pride, long overdue after centuries of degradation.

For others, however, Chicano Power led to cultural separatism and the belief that one's own people were superior to all others. These were the cultural nationalists, and they became dominant in the Chicano movement.

I was no separatist, but I believed that only Chicanos could fight Chicano oppression and that being Chicano was all that mattered in the struggle. I also felt that unity among all people of color would be forthcoming in any showdown with the gringos.

Three developments changed my perspective.

I saw that the sexism of the macho leaders of MEChA, the leading Chicano student organization, was rapidly pushing women out of the movement. And it soon became clear that the "race is primary" viewpoint made it impossible to address sexism.

Secondly, I saw that elevating one's own culture above all others led to friction between people of color and lessened our joint effectiveness against the powers-that-be.

Finally, I learned how quickly class and political divisions take precedence over race or ethnic unity. A Black UW administrator fired the director of the Chicano division of Minority Affairs because of the latter's involvement in the movement!

Race and culture politics were getting us nowhere fast. But I had no alternative.

*¡Hola, revolución!*

Looking back, I was lucky that I had to work my way through college. Otherwise, I might never have become

involved in a campus labor struggle that changed my life.

This fight was in opposition to a sexist and racist job reclassification system that would have lowered pay scales for entry-level jobs and clerical, service, and other low-paid positions, the bulk of which were filled by women and people of color.

I wound up helping to organize United Workers Union-Independent, which fought for the most oppressed workers at the university.

Seattle Radical Women members were in the leadership of this union. And in working with them, I learned for the first time to trust white workers on the basis of *political agreement*.

Something else happened: I found new strength and commitment to struggle through the support and political leadership of these socialist women. And my own deeply suppressed feminism emerged.

This was something *really* new! I was learning how to fight simultaneously against my oppression as a Chicana, a woman, a worker, and a mother. I felt for the first time that I was fighting for *all* of what I am and who I am.

This was socialist feminism. And it was for *me!*

It wasn't long, however, before I was told to stay away from Radical Women by the Chicana



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culturalists and the sexist Chicano men. Then my husband gave me a further ultimatum: "Be my full-time wife. I don't want a political wife."

My decision was clear. *Adiós mi esposo*, good morning independence!

I joined Radical Women. And soon I joined the Freedom Socialist Party, the only revolutionary feminist party on earth. It had to be.

## *Adiós to Aztlán*

My subsequent work in the Chicano community often brought me in conflict with those same cultural nationalists who had tried to drive me out of the movement. They were still in the leadership and still shouting out anti-gringo separatism as the solution to our oppression.

Our own nation—Aztlán—was their war cry. But how this nation would be achieved, where it would be located, and how its current inhabitants would be removed, they never said.

I couldn't buy it. The U.S. government had forced segregation on us for hundreds of years. Why voluntarily go along with that program? Why remove ourselves as a challenge to the segregation, exploitation, discrimination, and genocide of U.S. rule? What could this self-imposed segregation into a new capitalist country possibly gain us?

This is not to say that my culture is not important to me—it is. But my culture is far *more* than just a slogan for macho self-aggrandizement. I will not use it to hide myself from struggle and to yearn for an unreachable—and undesirable!—Aztlán.

We Chicanas and Chicanos are the victims of racism, treated like foreigners and relegated to second- and third-class citizenship. Yet the USA is *our* land. We are Americans.

My people have been here for 400 years. We were once Mexicanos, part of Mexico, but almost 150 years have passed since our land was ripped away from Mexico by the gringos. And our culture has grown away from Mexico, taking much from the Indian, the Black, and the Anglo. Indeed, we call ourselves Chicano in acknowledgment of our Indian blood. We are who we are today in relation to all the other cultures we lived beside and commingled with through the years.

Our culture is uniquely our own. But culture is not enough to form a nation. We do not have our own economy, and ownership of the economy is basic to

nationhood. Also, our territory is shared with many other peoples. These factors make a separate nation impossible.

We are workers, part of the U.S. proletariat. Our labor *built* the American Southwest. Driven off our land and herded into *barrios*, we worked in the mines, on railroads and on ranches, and in factories. Our blood and sweat have been incorporated into the muscle and bone of the U.S. economy.

We are workers who keep this country running. This country is ours. We earned it. And we are not about to leave it. Our job is to *transform* it.

### *¡Viva la revolución Americana!*

It is as workers, fighting together with our sisters and brothers of all colors against the bosses, that we Chicanos proudly take our place as leaders in the American revolution.

Who knows better than we, the super-oppressed, how to fight and defeat our real enemy, the U.S. capitalist class—those sexists, racists, exploiters, dividers, and oppressors of people of color, women, children, gays, and every worker?

We are warriors in a class conflagration. We have fought with other American workers for survival and dignity as workers against bosses and cops and the government. We Chicanos organized and led countless unions; we imparted to U.S. unionism the fiery idealism and socialist theory of the Mexican Revolution.

I take my stand in the American revolution as a socialist and a feminist fighting for a place in the sun and a better life for Chicanos and for all of us.

*¡Adelante mujer!*

*¡Viva el socialismo y la libertad!*



## Exploring common differences

1983

by Nellie Wong

I can just hear my mother now. “What do you mean, *you’re* going to a conference of international women of color? You mean *you’re* going to speak—and to read poetry, too?”

Unfortunately, my mother’s gone and doesn’t know I’ve become a poet and socialist feminist activist. If she were here, you can bet our conversations would be peppered with excitement. Our mouths would taste the curry of talk among women of color. And I’d have a heck of a time explaining in Cantonese American English just what I’d be saying at this conference called “Common Differences: Third World Women and Feminist Perspectives.”

To explore the complex similarities and differences among 600 women from diverse groups and cultures! To read, to write, and speak out. Just up my alley. The conference was a whirlwind. Who slept? Not this long steam lady, this *cheong hay poa*, loquacious woman.

The conference was held from April 9-13, 1983 at the University of Illinois. Agenda topics ranged from cross-cultural perspectives on feminism, to women in revolutionary movements, to the politics of women’s health and reproductive rights, to racism and sexism in popular culture. Panelists and participants included Native American, Asian/Pacific, Chicana/Latina, and Black women of the U.S., and women from Latin America, Africa, Asia,

Europe, and the Middle East. We met and heard keynoters Isabel Letelier from Chile, Dr. Nawal el Sadaawi from Egypt, and Ntozake Shange and Cherríe Moraga of the United States.

The world's women spoke on the world of problems and oppression we face—the growing poverty of women, hungry children, the plight of refugees. But hardly anyone named our common enemy: international capitalism, which maintains racism, sexism, and heterosexism to keep women down.

Academic excellence and scholarship were the cuisine at this conference. But we in Radical Women had a spicy dish to serve—worldwide socialist feminism, the theory and action that flow from our lives. We stressed solidarity among all the exploited; the political leadership of women of color, lesbians, workers and feminist men; building a socialist feminist revolution on U.S. soil.

## Out of the shadows

Even at this gathering, the myth of Asian American invisibility shrouded us. Very few Asian/Pacific women from the U.S. or other countries attended. There were no workshops or panels to deal with our issues. We had to fight to be seen and heard.

We organized our own workshop to address this invisibility, this racism. Our speakers included Susie Ling from L.A., Emily Woo Yamasaki and Christine Choy of New York City, Lola Wing from Chicago, and me, from Oakland, California.

Over 50 people came, many of us Asian/Pacific Americans. Where did everybody suddenly come from? We talked about stereotyped images of Asian/Pacific women, prostitution, lesbianism, feminism, and free speech.

My comrade, Emily Woo Yamasaki, hit hard at the problem of invisibility which, she said, “extends into politics, too.” At Isabel Letelier’s keynote address, Emily

had said that “the best way we in the United States can support struggle abroad is to have a revolution here.” Some people laughed! “People looked at me as a young Asian woman and didn’t take me seriously—I needed to ‘grow out of it.’ To these people I say: *you* are the ones who have to come to terms with reality.”

Emily, who represented New York Radical Women and the Merle Woo Defense Committee at the conference, got a resolution passed at this workshop supporting Merle Woo, who was fired from her job at the University of California at Berkeley because of her feminism, lesbianism, and radical politics.

Ma, I wish you could have seen us carrying out the lessons you taught about being prepared, speaking out, and fighting to win.

## The artist and politics

If my mother had been at the conference, she would have heard me speak on the unity of poetry and principled activism at a panel about women and language.

“If we choose to write about women’s work and struggles in non-personal terms, we are being rhetorical, not universal—boring, unfeminine, whatever. And if we write personally, about having to be on welfare, or being afraid our husbands will take our children because we’re lesbians or revolutionaries, or if we write other than ‘standard’ American English—whatever that is—then indeed we have violated the ‘acceptable’ code of literature.

“But I seek the words and the language of the most militant fighters for freedom. I seek the beauty of human struggle, to sing out what our foremothers and forefathers fought for, to give inspiration, love and support to those people who are still fighting for bread and roses.”

## A heated and healthy debate

A hidden dispute raged throughout the conference between cultural feminists, who advocated lesbianism as a

single-issue solution to women's oppression, and homophobic Stalinist academics, who pushed class and race as the primary issues, defining lesbianism as a personal, secondary issue.

This debate burst into the open near the end of the conference, after a keynote

address by Chicana lesbian writer Cherríe Moraga. Her exclusive emphasis



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on lesbianism started a heated—and healthy—debate on the floor. But Moraga's response was to halt discussion, turn off the mike, and leave the room!

Our ideas as women of color were thus censored. Those of us who saw the synthesis of race, class, sex, and sexual oppression—with none “secondary”—had no chance to speak.

Yet this explosion prompted those who had been pushing for political action at the conference to go to the mikes in the wake of Moraga's departure and organize on the spot for preparing and passing resolutions. As a result, the final plenary *did* take political stands, against the intentions of the conference organizers. The vote was unanimous for a resolution supporting Merle Woo, and for another which called for making lesbianism and sexuality central issues for discussion at future conferences.

## Heads and tails

What can I say about this conference as a whole?

My father would have criticized it as *yew how, mo mee*. Have head, no tail. We must extend feminist politics to *yew how, yew mee*. Have head, have tail. The *whole* body, mind *and* action. Militant politics which embrace the personal and art.

Our political commitment to women internationally

must not be left to chance, to abstract intellectualization, to single-issue politics, to elevating the struggle against racism over the fight against sexism, to opportunism.

We must learn the wisdom of survival which our parents knew. My parents, who raised seven children in Oakland Chinatown, three of us born in China, had to pay attention to details, plan for tomorrow.

I, the first U.S.-born daughter, know that among our common differences we must find a common understanding, a unity that will lead us to liberation.



## Lesbians of Color Conference: The politics of “sisterhood”

1983

*by Nancy Reiko Kato*

“Sisters Bonding” was the theme for the first national Lesbians of Color Conference, held September 8-11, 1983 in Malibu, California. Over 200 women of color, among them Latinas, Chicanas, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Blacks, and Caribbean women, attended. They included lesbian separatists, leftists, and independents. The radical wing of the lesbian/gay movement was represented by Seattle’s Stonewall Committee for Lesbian/Gay Rights. Socialist feminists also attended, represented by National Radical Women.

Los Angeles Lesbians of Color organized the conference so that “we may begin to know each other, reach out, touch and trust, to form lasting alliances and friendship...” Unfortunately, what they had in mind were primarily personal and social, rather than political, alliances.

There is nothing at all wrong with getting to know each other. But at a time when lesbians of color desperately need to mount national strategies to fight against everything from anti-abortion attacks to gaybashing to social service cuts to repressive immigration legislation to union busting, getting to know each other is not enough.

This conference had great potential as a starting point for strategizing and organizing against rightwing reaction. But it shortchanged those women who came for serious political discussion and active proposals for fighting back

that they could take home to their communities.

Most of the workshops were aimed in an anti-political direction, dealing with things such as personal identity, spirituality, and self-growth. A visible portion of conference attendees came merely to have a good time and to develop social networks. They wanted their own space—to retreat from political commitment.

## Anti-political politics

But there is no real retreat from politics, or from the racism, sexism, and class oppression that permeate capitalist society, including the movements for social change. The anti-political atmosphere at the conference actually gave rise to two very definite brands of political ideology, lesbian separatism and cultural nationalism, both of which express capitulation to racist and sexist divisiveness and thrive in an atmosphere of political retreat.

Separatism and cultural nationalism are *exclusionary* by nature. Separatists see men—and straight women—as the enemy. Cultural nationalists see culture and color as the only bases for interaction and alliance. Both attack all those who do not look, think, or act like they do.

There were two groups of women who came under fire from the separatists and cultural nationalists at the conference: straight women of color with long histories of solidarity with the lesbian/gay movement, who'd been invited by the conference organizers to give workshops, and light-skinned lesbians, who weren't colored enough to suit the nationalists.

Straight-baiting started at a meeting called on the second day to discuss issues which weren't being addressed at the conference. A separatist jumped up and proclaimed that she didn't "want anything to do with a woman who plugs into a man." Cultural nationalists also attacked the light-skinned lesbians present. Not surprisingly, both they and the separatists *opposed* discussing the issues of racism, sexism, and class oppression in society

and what can be done to end them. One remarked that she had come to the conference to get away from all that.

## Defending our allies

A majority of the women at the meeting defended the right of straight and light-skinned women to attend. One Latina stated, “We must be *inclusive*, not *exclusive*.” Radical Women member Merle Woo pointed out that many straight women have given unwavering support to lesbian and gay rights at the expense of being unmercifully lesbian-baited themselves. Woo pointed to fellow RW member Nellie Wong, a nationally known poet who has consistently defended lesbian/gay rights in her art. Wong, she said, like the other straight women at the conference, is an ally to be welcomed rather than repudiated.

As a result of the attacks, Radical Women members—Woo, Wong, and Nancy Kato from the Bay Area, Emily Woo Yamasaki from New York City, and Midge Ward from Seattle, a Native American activist who also represented the Stonewall Committee—drafted a resolution that excoriated:

...the divisive and self-destructive politics based on sexuality and skin color.

We could have endless discussions of who a REAL lesbian of color is and never get around to setting about fighting the real enemy. Some lesbians of color are looking for a safe space, thinking safety is where we are all the same. But in reality, safety is where we can unite with others to defeat the right wing, capitalism, and the patriarchy. Safety is not obtained by shutting out our allies.

## Where the action was

Despite the separatists, cultural nationalists, and the general anti-political tenor of the conference, there were a few sessions that included good political discussions that

struck a note of reality in dealing with the oppression of lesbians of color.

A statement from the Indian Women's Circle, which focused on the genocide against Native people, called on lesbians of color to support Indian women's leadership in the social change movements and demanded the right to self-determination for Native Americans. Also, the Open Rap

Group for Asian Lesbians proposed compiling an Asian lesbian anthology and presenting a



**Only a movement uniting lesbians of color with all women, people of color, and workers can end oppression.**

panel on Asian lesbians at the next National Women's Studies Association Conference.

Nellie Wong gave a workshop entitled "The Battle to Overcome Racism in the Women's Movement." Almost a quarter of the women at the conference sat in to hear Wong stress the importance of women of color and white women uniting to fight against the color line in the feminist movement. Wong emphasized the importance of confronting racism inside the movement and said that white women have a special responsibility to fight it. She stated, however, that racism, like sexism, cannot be fought on an individual basis and that only a movement uniting lesbians of color with all women, people of color, and the entire working class can make the political, social, and economic changes necessary to end our oppression.

Another workshop, entitled "Politics: Knowing and Acting," featured talks by Merle Woo, who was fired from the University of California/Berkeley for being a lesbian and a socialist feminist; Kwambe OmDahda, a lawyer and founder of Lesbians of Color; and Mitsuye Yamada, a teacher and poet who is co-featured in the film *Mitsuye and Nellie: Asian American Poets*.

Woo explained that her fight to regain her job is both a

direct challenge to the political discrimination perpetrated at UC and “a way of educating people about multi-issue, socialist feminist ideas.” OmDahda gave a good presentation on the legal rights of lesbians, and Yamada stressed the importance of grassroot struggles.

A resolution in support of Woo’s case was passed in this workshop. Unfortunately, there was no place on the agenda for formal resolutions to be adopted by the conference as a whole—a result of the organizers’ refusal to take political responsibility for the lesbians of color movement.

### **Real ties that bind**

There are some hard political lessons to be learned from this conference, and a need for continued discussion on sexual and color politics in our communities.

We can only hope that the bankrupt politics of lesbian separatism and cultural nationalism will be totally rejected from our movement, that never again will the separatists and nationalists be allowed to launch shameless attacks on light-skinned lesbians and the straight women of color who stand with us, and that bonding between sisters will be based on a movement that *unites* us in the fight to end our oppression.



## Medgar Evers College: Shall education serve the community?

1984

by *Emily Woo Yamasaki*

**I**n this era of rampant cutbacks in education, the fight by students, faculty, and staff to save Medgar Evers College (MEC) in Brooklyn, New York gives heart to the nationwide struggle to make education serve the needs of the community.

Located in the largest Black community in the Western Hemisphere, Medgar Evers College was established in 1971 as a result of demands by New York City's Black community for an "experimental and innovative institution which meets the needs of the city it must serve." The college is one of 17 in the City University of New York (CUNY) system. Ninety-five percent of its 3,000 students are Black, 73% are women, two-thirds of them mothers.

From MEC's beginning, there were battles with administration over its direction. The first came in 1972 when students attempted to oust MEC President Richard Trent, who, though Black, willingly served the interests of the racist and sexist CUNY administration. During his tenure, Trent attempted to suppress academic freedom through intimidation and harassment, and opposed Black Studies and campus childcare. In 1974, attempts by CUNY to close the college provoked clashes between police and a student/faculty coalition.

When New York hit the fiscal skids in the mid-1970s, Medgar Evers College became a prime target for budget

cuts. In 1976, it was reduced from a four-year college to a two-year community college. Funding and curriculum were cut, library resources were reduced, and faculty workloads were doubled.

The campus shrank from nine buildings to two: a former warehouse and a decaying 100-year-old high school building. Heating and plumbing were unreliable. The buildings were infested with rats. CUNY figured that if it couldn't tame the students and faculty, it would let the college fall down about them.

### **Sitting in for equal education**

As the unwanted stepchild of the CUNY system, MEC would certainly have been closed had not students and faculty fought like hell for over 10 years to keep it open. Black feminists formed the backbone of this effort.

In April 1982, following a two-week student strike, the Student-Faculty-Community-Alumni Coalition to Save Medgar Evers College initiated an historic 110-day sit-in in President Trent's office, which finally forced him to resign.

The sit-in also won a drop-in childcare center and a Center for Women's Development. But funding was not forthcoming.

### **Presidential politics**

Retaliation followed close on the heels of these victories. Trent's CUNY-appointed successor, Acting President Dennis Paul, denied reappointment to four professors who were active members of the Coalition. Only rapid mobilization by an angry community won back all four jobs.

Not learning from that lesson, Paul axed five more progressive faculty members in December 1983, his last month in office. Four of the teachers were women and all had excellent academic standing. These firings were clearly designed to eliminate opposition to Paul's permanent appointment as MEC's president, and also to thwart development of a Black Studies program. One target, Dr.



*One of many community protests over the years to preserve Medgar Evers College.*

Sheila Mayers-Johnson, was the country's first chairperson of a Black Studies program.

Undaunted, the Coalition stepped up its campaign for community control of the college. At a series of CUNY Board of Trustees meetings in the fall of '83, students, faculty, and supporters from community and feminist organizations demanded that the permanent president be a Black woman who understood the students' needs. They called for restoration of MEC to four-year senior college status, adequate funding for the Child Development Center Studies program, and repair of college facilities.

Despite student and faculty advocacy of a Black woman progressive, Dr. Gloria Joseph, the CUNY chancellor and trustees picked a Black man, Jay Carrington Chunn, for president.

At first, Chunn appeared to support the activists. He rehired three of the five fired professors. He appointed several women to the position of dean. And he lobbied to

have Medgar Evers College restored to four-year status.

But these moves were designed to lull the community to sleep, and Chunn has now reneged on his earlier promises of funding and support. An especially sharp battle is shaping up over Chunn's refusal to fund needed counseling and secretarial positions for the Women's Center. The Center's staff and supporters have demanded a meeting with Chunn, and MEC's faculty voted to boycott his official November 8 inauguration.

## Back to battle

It's a new school year and back to the fight for the heirs of Medgar Evers in Brooklyn's Black community, especially the intransigent Black women who lead the MEC fight and rally to it all those concerned with equal education and equal rights.

The MEC struggle shows once again that we can't expect equal educational opportunity from CUNY-like bureaucracies, but only through shared, persistent, and militant community commitment to the aspirations of the oppressed. The determined Black women and their supporters will prevail at Medgar Evers College.



<http://www.RedLetterPress.org>



## Women strikers shake up the Bay Area

1985

by Nancy Reiko Kato

In the San Francisco Bay Area, constant strike activity marked the 50th anniversary of the 1934 San Francisco General Strike. But in 50 years, the face of organized labor has dramatically changed. The primary impetus for the 1934 strike came from white males in unions such as the longshoremen's union; people of color and women were denied entry into many jobs; and, in addition, many unions had discriminatory policies that barred them from membership. Today it is women of color who are the driving force in Bay Area labor actions; although racism and sexism have kept them in low-paid, "unskilled" jobs, they have entered the work force in ever-growing numbers and have been the strongest fighters for unionization.

This is not just a local phenomenon but part of a nationwide labor resurgence spearheaded by people of color, who, while historically leaders in battles for workers' rights, have only in the last decades gained a foothold within organized labor. The most shunned and exploited workers now far outnumber relatively privileged white males in the work force. And women of color, trained as fighters by their life struggles against bigotry and poverty, are the staunchest of fighters who resist because they *must*.

Over the past year, Filipinas, Chicanas/Latinas, Chinese and Black women have struck Bay Area companies