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Yakima Raids Project for the National Week of Action

Building political power for immigrants and refugees

Organizing's New Arrival

by Maya Muir

In the Seattle school district, students from immigrant backgrounds who speak any one of over 100 different languages are threatened by an attack on bilingual education. In northern Nevada, Latino immigrants from countries where open political affiliation could result in repression often avoid electoral politics even after becoming U.S. citizens. Throughout the West, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) selectively raids Latino communities, creating a climate of fear and often splitting families and communities apart.

These are only some of the problems faced by immigrants and refugees today in the western states, in a political climate in which the Right, nationally, is whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment as one of their prime organizing tools, particularly against people of color. (See related stories on pages 10 & 11)

Immigrant and refugee communities are organizing against the attacks. In the West, some of the most exciting resistance is being led by three young community-based organizations, themselves led by women of color from immigrant families: in Seattle, the Washington Alliance for Immigrant and Refugee Justice (WAIRJ) and the Asian Pacific American Coalition for Equity, and in northern Nevada, Latinos for Political Education (LAPE).

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Immigrant & Refugee Organizing

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The Washington Alliance for Immigrant and Refugee Justice

WAIRJ grew out of a coalition that formed in 1995 in response to a petition generated in western Washington's Skagit Valley, a hotbed of anti-immigrant sentiment. The petition, if successful, would have placed a copycat version of California's Proposition 187 to a statewide vote, threatening to deny education and health services to "apparent illegal aliens." Although the initiative never made it to the ballot, strong anti-immigrant sentiment and the threat of similar initiatives remain.

The following year, under the leadership of the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project (NWIRP), the coalition decided to become permanent and to advocate for immigrant and

refugee rights in Washington State. NWIRP hired Soya Jung to coordinate and develop the new organization. Jung, whose family immigrated from Korea in the 60s, had previously worked for the Washington State Democratic Caucus and as a reporter for the *International Examiner*, an Asian-American newspaper in Seattle.

"We faced one battle after another in 1996 as WAIRJ got

established," says Jung. "Three major laws — the Anti-terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act in April, the federal welfare law in August, and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act in September — threw out all the rules for immigrants, replacing them with incredibly harsh provisions."

The 1996 federal welfare law eliminated food stamps and disability benefits for over 1 million immigrants and refugees nationwide. In fact, over 40 percent of welfare cuts were from immigrants, regardless of "legal" status, who only made up five percent of welfare recipients. WAIRJ worked hard to secure replacement programs in Washington state — and succeeded. Washington now has the most generous welfare policies for immigrants and refugees in the nation. However, access to welfare continues to be a focus for WAIRJ. "Although we've won back eligibility for critical programs, fear of being reported to the INS keeps many immigrants from getting the services they need — even if they're legally eligible," Jung explains. WAIRJ is now working to draw attention to the injustices of new immigrant reporting and verification requirements and other lesser-known provisions of the federal welfare law.

WAIRJ recently began examining changes in immigration law enforcement and detention provisions. "The 1996 laws created mandatory detention for more than 34 kinds of criminal convictions, many of them minor, even after people have already served their sentences. People who are being locked up include asylum seekers, undocumented workers and legal residents with green cards," says Jung, "and the law is retroactive." In addition, immigrant detainees no longer have access to judicial review, and are unable to argue their cases before a judge. "Nationally 16,000 people are being held, 11,000 in county jails. Many of these people can't be deported because we have poor diplomatic relations with their countries of origin, because the country is in turmoil, or because the country refuses to accept them. So, often what we're seeing is indefinite incarceration, not short-term detention. The INS calls them 'lifers.'" Who are these people? Nationally, Cubans make up the biggest sector, followed by Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians. "It's part of a culture of incarceration that disproportionately affects people of color in this country," says Jung.

"We want to build a unified and lasting multi-racial immigrant-rights movement."

— Soya Jung



WAIRJ

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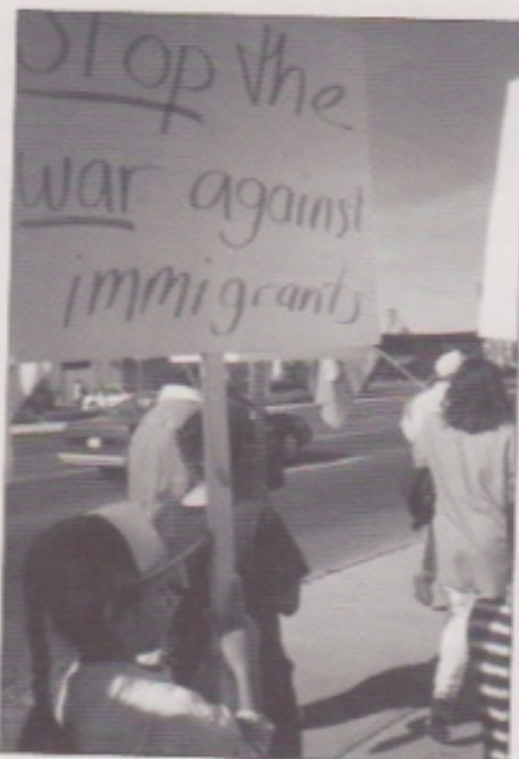
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