

# Michigan meeting marks 30th anniversary of murder of Vincent Chin

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On June 23, the Asian American civil rights group American Citizens for Justice (ACJ) along with the Association of Chinese Americans sponsored a commemoration meeting in Madison Heights, Michigan to mark thirty years since the murder of Vincent Chin. The event was attended by about 100 people and included moving testimony by friends of Vincent Chin.

A Chrysler foreman and his unemployed son fatally beat Chin, a 27-year-old Chinese American, with a baseball bat in Highland Park Michigan on June 19, 1982. Chin and a group of friends were at a bar celebrating Chin's upcoming wedding when Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz hurled racial slurs at Chin and instigated a fight. After they were thrown out of the bar, Ebens and Nitz hunted Chin down and beat him to death with a baseball bat.

The killing took place in the context of a vicious campaign of anti-Japanese racism promoted by the United Auto Workers and Democratic Party politicians, who blamed foreign imports for the loss of jobs in the US.

Ebens, a Chrysler plant superintendent, and his stepson Nitz, never spent a day in jail for the crime. A plea bargain reduced the charges from second-degree murder to manslaughter, with the judge sentencing the pair to 3 years probation and ordering them to pay a fine of some \$3,000.

The commemorative meeting included several panel discussions and a showing of the 1987 documentary "Vincent Who?", which received an Academy Award nomination for best documentary. The event concluded with a ceremony at Chin's gravesite.

However, the political perspective advanced by speakers showed that the ACJ has drawn few if any political conclusions from the tragedy and its aftermath

about the role of the courts and the capitalist state. The illusions of organizers in the role of the police agencies of the US government as a defenders of civil rights was expressed by the presence of an FBI recruiter in the audience.

In her opening remarks, Prasanna Vengadam, president of the American Citizens for Justice, paid tribute to Lily Chin, the mother of Vincent Chin. It was through the efforts of Ms. Chin that the events surrounding the death of her son came to national attention. In order to defuse public anger over the light sentences for the killers, the US Justice Department eventually launched a civil rights prosecution of Ebens and Nitz. In the ensuing trial Nitz was acquitted of all charges while Ebens received a 25-year sentence. However, Ebens' conviction was thrown out on procedural grounds with a retrial resulting in an acquittal.

Denise Yee Grim, a former friend of Vincent Chin, described her memories of him. "Vincent had a golden heart. Anyone in need, he would help them out."

Kathy Gee, another former friend of Chin, described the night of the killing. "We got a phone call late at night from the best man at the bachelor party. He said, Vincent was chased. They found him and knocked him down and started hitting with a bat. It was just so shocking. He was a sweet person."

Attorney James Shimoura provided legal assistance (see interview) to Lily Chin following the acquittal of Ebens and Nitz. He spoke of his outrage at the acquittals. "You have clients behind bars who are behind in child support who spent more time in jail than Ebens did. At the end it still resulted in acquittal. It was the ultimate insult."

He warned that anti-immigrant and anti-Asian sentiment was again on the rise, fueled by the same

reactionary forces that helped instigate the death of Vincent Chin. “The economy is in the tank. This time it is the Chinese. This time you don’t have the bashing of cars in front of Solidarity House (headquarters of the United Auto Workers), but the issue is still there. In some ways it is getting worse.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of those attending the event. Mike, a 20-year veteran of the automotive industry, told the WSWs: “It was a racist crime and I oppose racism. I participated in the original protests when it happened 30 years ago. I’m part Japanese. I was concerned about the anti-Japanese sentiment during the 1980s downturn. Instead of focusing the built-up anger on the owners of the companies, there was a lot of Japanese bashing. These men felt justified to take a baseball bat to Vincent because they thought he was Japanese. The owners on Wall Street foment jingoism to defend their profits. The UAW was only a part of this, but it left the workers unprepared.”

Victoria traveled as part of a delegation from the Asian American Institute in Chicago. “I was born and raised in the US and my parents were born in Hong Kong. I am sure they shared a lot of the same experiences as Vincent Chin. With an Asian background it is difficult.” She added, “I knew about the incident prior to joining the program. I think it can happen again. I think it is good to mark the anniversary to make sure people know about it. The focus should be on corporations sending jobs away, not other people taking jobs.”

Her friend Thida added, “We want to bring awareness to the incident. People don’t know about it, they just take it for granted.”

Kenneth and Lorrie Prange attended the memorial. Kenneth, 81, is a Dodge truck retiree. He said, “I remember the event and being outraged that they were acquitted. I was disappointed for our country that this could happen here. They should have gone to prison. From what I understand, the one killer hasn’t met his obligation and hasn’t paid the family.”

Lorrie said, “We’re just ordinary people, but when we saw the commemoration, we decided we should be here to remember Vincent.”

Dorothea McCurdy is studying to be a teacher of English as a second language. “I wanted to find out about Chinese culture. And Curtis Chin, Vincent

Chin’s cousin, shared his video about the killing. I think people are becoming more aware. It hasn’t gone away. Being an English as a second language teacher I see the little things that are going on.

“I have noticed that you have immigrants who want to go to college who can’t because they don’t have the papers they need. You have immigrants from all different countries who come here to make a contribution, but it doesn’t happen. I think events like this help to bring awareness to things that happened 30 years ago but that people don’t necessarily talk about.”



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