

James Shimoura, attorney for the mother of Vincent Chin, speaks to WSWS

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James Shimoura, a Michigan attorney who provided legal advice to Lily Chin, the mother of murdered Chinese American draftsman Vincent Chin, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* during the memorial meeting in Madison Heights, Michigan held over the weekend. The meeting marked the 30th anniversary of Chin's killing.

Chin was beaten to death in Highland Park, Michigan on June 19, 1982 in a racially motivated killing. The murder took place in the midst of a vicious anti-Japanese campaign by the United Auto Workers and Democratic Party politicians who blamed foreign imports for the loss of jobs in the US.

WSWS: Can you tell a little about the political climate at the time of the Vincent Chin murder?

JS: The rhetoric at the time was virulent. There were union leaders smashing Japanese cars with hammers and bats and there were public pronouncements by politicians and people in the corporate area targeting Japanese car manufacturers as being the cause of the recession. It was a campaign of disinformation to deflect public opinion away from the real cause, which was quite complex. At a time of a very hostile public reaction you try to find scapegoats to deflect the anger.

People from Italy and Ireland became the scapegoat during various periods of time in American history. It's hardly new. What happens now is a little more sophisticated than 30 years ago. Whenever you have economic turmoil there is always tendency to try to reach out and find someone to blame for the current crisis, when in fact these crisis don't happen overnight. They are systemic and involve many different events.

There is a lot of manipulation of public opinion. It is irritating to hear this politics about so-called threats when it is really bigger issues. There is a disconnect

between the public debate and what the reality is.

Whenever you have a downturn people are looking for a quick fix. [Politicians] say I am losing my job because people in China are taking it away, but what [they] really should talk about is that US companies moved the jobs over there. They made a decision to move factories where they can find the cheapest labor. China isn't making the decision. US companies choose to move manufacturing offshore.

The irony is that China is experiencing the same social pressures as any emerging market. As the workers demand more wages and benefits the cost advantage is diminished. Now even the Chinese find that a lot of companies are moving their plants to Vietnam and Cambodia to find lower labor costs.

This is something that is driving the economic activity, but the politicians and the way it is being presented is totally disconnected. Its not the Chinese or Asians or anybody, the decision is being made by somebody in the United States saying we have to move manufacturing to places we can find lower costs. People are being fooled and duped by the way the issue is being aired publicly. Unfortunately there are very few voices speaking out.

WSWS: How did you become involved in the case?

JS: I am a native Detroiter. My family has been here since the turn of the century. Almost 100 years. At the time I was one of only two-dozen Asian American attorneys in the area. When the sentencing came down in March of 1983, there was a call that there was going to be a meeting down at the restaurant where Vincent Chin worked and they wanted to get my opinion on what the options were. It was over in Ferndale. There was a very personal level of connection because my mother and her family were placed in a concentration camp during WWII out in California. It resonated with

me. The very core of me felt offended and angry at a very basic level that he could kill someone with a baseball bat and not spend a day in jail.

At the time we weren't very well organized and there was a lot of hit and miss and a lot of guesswork. The majority of the lawyers who were involved from the community were very young. For all of us it was learning experience. Everything was a new challenge. The technology was different back then; there was a lot of hard mechanical work to get material and outreach. We had to do a lot physical travel to rally support for the case. We were unpopular initially.

WSWS: What about the role of the political establishment?

JS: We were turned down by politicians. We were turned down by the courts. The prosecutor wouldn't talk to us. (Democratic Michigan Governor) Blanchard only said he was watching it. Well, that didn't help us. There are a lot of things that could have been done that would have been helpful at the time that didn't get done.

WSWS: Can you speak about the campaign held in the wake of the token sentences handed down to Vincent Chin's killers?

JS: It really shocked the minds of a lot of folks when we had 500 or 600 people show up at a rally in downtown Detroit. That was unprecedented. We had rallies and events from New York to California. In the history of the Department of Justice, I was told at the time, this case generated more phone calls and letters to the attorney general of the United States than at any time before. I was told we had upwards of 15,000 letters, telegrams and phone calls into the Department of Justice calling for a civil rights prosecution. It was an amazing series of events to get the momentum to force the attention of the Department of Justice. The DOJ is not required to launch a prosecution. Even going back to Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner [the three civil rights workers murdered in 1964] the prosecution was discretionary. There is nothing to legally mandate the federal government to go forward. It was political decision made at a very high level. Washington and the White House were directly involved to chose to investigate and assess the potential of a civil rights prosecution.

I have always said it was great they did that. But the real problem was not the civil rights prosecution, but

that the case should have been handled properly locally. To sit there and walk away and pay a fine, shocks the conscience of anybody. The crass reaction by the prosecutor and judge galvanized local support. The big problem was to get the public to recognize that Asians can be the victims of discrimination. Now there is a broader envelope of understanding of people who are potentially targets of discrimination and hate crimes. But it took a long time. The mechanism is more sophisticated than 30 years ago.



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