

Forty-year anniversary of Vincent Chin killing marked amid surge of anti-Asian violence

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June 19 marks the 40th anniversary of the death of Chinese-American draftsman Vincent Chin, who was beaten to death in Detroit by Chrysler plant superintendent Ronald Ebens and his unemployed stepson Michael Nitz. The murder took place amid a wave of anti-Japanese hysteria fanned by the United Auto Workers and Democratic Party politicians.

The two men beat Chin to death with a baseball bat following an altercation at a bar, where the two, believing Chin to be Japanese, yelled, “It’s because of you little (expletives) that we’re out of work!” Ebens and Nitz never spent a day in jail for their crime.

The anniversary takes place at a time when hate crimes against Asians are again on the rise. It is being marked by several public events in Detroit, including a re-screening of the Academy Award-nominated film *Who killed Vincent Chin?* The film will also be broadcast on PBS Monday evening at 10 PM.

According to one report, there was a 224 percent rise in the number of hate crimes directed against Asian Americans in 2021. This comes in the midst of a deliberate effort to whip up hysteria against China with the bogus and debunked claim that COVID-19 was spread from a Chinese laboratory, itself part of a broader campaign of war propaganda directed against China. At the same time, every effort is being made to foment divisions in the working class through various forms of anti-immigrant bigotry and racist politics.

On the anniversary of Vincent Chin’s death, the UAW published a piece on its website, “When Labor Let Its Values Down: Remembering Vincent Chin.” This deceitful and hypocritical piece was authored by Sandra Engle, director of the UAW’s Public Relations Department.

While decrying the anti-Asian bigotry that triggered Chin’s killing, the article makes no mention of the central role played by the UAW in stoking it. Engle instead blames “UAW members” and “other members of other unions” for the racist hysteria. In other words, it places the blame on rank-and-file autoworkers rather than the UAW leadership.

The UAW has never taken responsibility for its central role in the anti-Japanese campaign that created the climate for the killing of Vincent Chin. The whipping up of hysteria over “Japanese imports,” including the smashing of Japanese-made cars in union parking lots, went hand in hand with UAW-imposed concessions which, in the name of “competitiveness,” gutted the wages and

working conditions of US autoworkers.

Economic nationalism and protectionism were used, in turn, to deflect the anger of American autoworkers away from the US-based “Big Three” auto makers and channel it against their class brothers and sisters in other countries. Nationalist poison was the ideological foundation for the adoption of “corporatism,” that is, the open repudiation of class struggle and the lying claim that the interests of US autoworkers were identical to those of the American auto companies. On this basis, joint union-company structures were set up at the national, regional and local level, transforming the “union” into an arm of management and the government to police the workers and suppress strikes.

The scapegoating of foreign workers—be they Mexican, Chinese or Japanese—has been the central narrative promoted by the UAW ever since.

Since the election of Joe Biden, the UAW has continued its targeting of China, enlisting in Biden’s “American Jobs Plan” amid the nonstop spouting of nationalist demagoguery.

It is important, as workers enter into mass struggles in the US and around the world, that they learn the lessons of this tragic episode, including the central role played by the UAW, so as to inoculate themselves against and combat all forms of nationalist demagoguery. In today’s global economy, workers can defend their rights and conditions only on the basis of a unified international struggle.

Below is the article posted by the WWSW on the 30th anniversary of Vincent Chin’s death.

Thirty years since the murder of Vincent Chin

June 19 marked the 30th anniversary of the murder of Vincent Chin, a 27-year-old Chinese-American draftsman who was beaten with a baseball bat in Highland Park, Michigan by Ronald Ebens, a Chrysler plant superintendent, and his laid-off stepson Michael Nitz. Chin died from his injuries four days later.

The murder came at the height of a campaign of vicious Japan-baiting by the United Auto Workers and Democratic Party politicians, who blamed foreign imports for the loss of American jobs.

Chin, who was engaged to be married later in the week, was the victim of a racially motivated attack. After a fight broke out at the bar where Chin was holding his bachelor party, Ebens shouted a

string of anti-Japanese epithets at the young Asian-American. Ebens and Nitz stalked Chin for 20 minutes down Woodward Avenue until they found him at a McDonald's restaurant. Chin attempted to flee but Nitz held Chin in a bear hug while Ebens smashed his head with a baseball bat.

The two killers never spent a day in jail, even though both admitted their guilt. A plea bargain reduced the charges from second-degree murder to manslaughter. A Wayne County judge sentenced them to three years probation and fined them \$3,000. The judge, a former POW of Japan during World War II, indicated his class bias in rejecting jail time, declaring Ebens a "responsible person" because he was a foreman at Chrysler.

The Chin killing, followed by the light sentence for Ebens and Nitz, sparked widespread anger. Vincent Chin's mother, Lily, spearheaded a campaign seeking justice for her son and other victims of hate crimes. Protests and rallies were held across the country denouncing the sentences.

As a consequence, in 1984 the federal government launched a civil rights prosecution of Ebens and Nitz. However, the prosecution was no more vigorous than before. In the ensuing trial, Nitz was acquitted of all charges while Ebens was convicted and sentenced to 25 years in prison. Ebens, however, won an appeal on procedural grounds and was acquitted in a retrial.

Lily Chin pursued a civil suit against Ebens and Nitz, winning a \$1.5 million judgment against Ebens. However, the ex-foreman did not make any payments. Lily Chin moved back to China where she died in 2002. Ebens, age 72, is living in retirement in Nevada.

There was only a relatively perfunctory official recognition of the 30-year anniversary of the tragedy. On June 19, Oakland County Commissioner Craig Covey issued a proclamation to the American Citizens for Justice, the civil rights group established by Lily Chin in the wake of her son's murder. Prasanna Vengadam, president of the ACJ, accepted a plaque on behalf of the organization. The organization will be holding a commemoration meeting June 23 at its headquarters in the Detroit suburb of Madison Heights.

The official commemoration of the Vincent Chin murder by a section of local Democratic Party officials was little more than a shamefaced attempt at cover-up for the role the trade union bureaucracy and big business politicians played in this tragedy.

The killing and subsequent whitewash took place in the context of a chauvinist campaign, led by the United Auto Workers and the Democratic Party, against the foreign rivals of the US auto companies, in the first place Japan. The UAW fomented anti-Asian racism through its reactionary campaign against Japanese imports, even smashing Japanese-built cars in union parking lots with sledgehammers.

Ebens and Nitz apparently thought Chin was Japanese, and they blamed him for the loss of US auto jobs. The night of the murder Ebens said to Chin, "It is because of you m....f.... we are out of work."

The UAW and the politicians of both political parties are continuing to promote chauvinist hatred against the overseas rivals of US capitalism, with China now the favorite target.

As the crisis of capitalism deepens, more and more attempts will be made to divert the anger of workers through the use of racial

and ethnic scapegoating. This makes drawing the lessons of the Vincent Chin case more important than ever.

A fight against all forms of national chauvinism is at the heart of the struggle to mobilize the working class against the assault on its jobs and living conditions. Workers must reject all attempts to pit American workers against their class brothers and sisters overseas.

All the gains of the American working class have come through the solidarity of workers of different races and ethnicities in a common struggle. It is not workers in Japan, Korea, China or Mexico who are responsible for the mass unemployment and declining living standards but the crisis of the profit system, which is condemning ever greater sections of the world's population to misery.

Capitalism is a global system, and in every country finance capital is seeking to shift its crisis onto the backs of the working class by driving down wages and living conditions. The revival of mass working class struggle requires intransigent opposition to all forms of nationalism and a political struggle for the international unity of the working class.

Prasanna Vengadam spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the Vincent Chin murder at the Oakland County Commission commemoration ceremony. "This case needs to be out there," he said. "I moved to the US from India 27 years ago. The last six years I have devoted myself to Asian-American advocacy.

"I am gladdened that there is an acknowledgement made of what was done. It is a small step in rectifying what went wrong.

"It is important to keep in mind what is happening today because of racial profiling. It is the same or worse. I don't think the scapegoating of 'others'—and Asian Americans are always seen as the 'others'—has stopped. It is not just anti-Japanese, it happens to South Asians a lot. When the economy is down, they want to blame those overseas. It creates a sense of hate toward this community with respect to outsourcing—'we have to fight the invasion of the Asians.'

"Peter Hoekstra (Republican candidate for US Senate in Michigan) is an example of that. He ran an anti-Chinese ad in the Super Bowl. It was such a negative message. It shows the animus is still there."



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