

Japanese American National Museum rally reveals rising opposition to Trump's drive toward dictatorship

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On Saturday August 23, about 500 survivors, activists and supporters gathered at the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo for a National Day of Action against President Donald Trump's escalating assault on historical truth, democratic rights and the working class.

The rally was part of a nationwide action spanning at least 19 states confronting Trump's plan to slash funding for the National Park Service, which actively preserves and interprets several World War II internment camps as designated national historic sites, and his broader campaign to rewrite US history to fit a reactionary nationalist agenda.

The demonstration took place at JANM's Historic Building and Mineta Democracy Plaza, the very site where Los Angeles-area Japanese Americans were ordered to assemble in 1942 for forced removal to internment camps without due process. Survivors of those camps stood alongside younger generations to issue an unmistakable warning: The United States is once again on the precipice of mass repression.

At the center of the outrage is Trump's Executive Order 14253, cynically titled "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History." Far from promoting truth, the order inaugurates an authoritarian cultural purge, rewriting curricula, altering museum exhibits, dismantling diversity initiatives and manipulating public narratives to glorify American capitalism and erase the crimes of US imperialism. Histories of slavery, indigenous genocide, immigrant incarceration and state repression are being whitewashed in the name of "patriotism."

At the Los Angeles rally, about a dozen survivors, some over 100 years old, were honored and seated on the stage. Behind them were flags naming the 10 concentration camps, where between 120,000 to 127,000 were incarcerated: Tule Lake, Manzanar, Minidoka, Heart Mountain, Topaz, Amache, Poston, Gila River, Jerome and Rohwer.

Saturday's rally highlighted five designated National Park sites—Manzanar, Minidoka, Tule Lake, Amache and Honouliuli in Hawaii. These historic sites, long preserved as a testament to state crimes, are now under existential threat as the administration slashes funding and seeks ideological control.

Ann Burroughs, president of JANM, stated, "What happened to the Japanese Americans in 1942 was a miscarriage of justice then, and what we're seeing happening to our brothers and sisters in

immigrant communities is a miscarriage of justice now."

She warned of the stakes of Trump's cultural purge: "These attempts to sanitize and reshape history fit a narrow ideological narrative that amounts to nothing less than the erasure of history."

Dr. Takashi Hoshizaki, 99, and his family were interned at Heart Mountain, Wyoming. He described how he was convicted in the trial of 63 draft resisters in June 1944 and sentenced to three years in the federal prison at McNeil Island, Washington, for violating the Selective Service Act. Many of his fellow inmates were conscientious objectors to the war. He was released on June 14, 1946.

Glenn Kitayama, a member of the Manzanar Committee, drew an unambiguous comparison to the rise of fascism in the 20th century: "During World War II, the late Nikkei journalist James Omura asked rhetorically, 'Has the Gestapo come to America?' I ask that same question today.

"They've begun to overhaul the National Park Service, the Smithsonian and other public institutions to censor how American history is remembered, presented and taught. They punished universities for allowing free speech on campus. They've targeted the free press as enemies of the people."

Voices of Survivors

Among the most powerful testimonies came from Kyoko Oda, a Tule Lake survivor whose father, Tatsuo Inouye, was confined in the camp's segregation stockade without due process.

"My father was suddenly taken to the stockade with a bayonet pointing at us. All of my family are gone now. I'm here to represent them and to teach the next generation what they went through. If we don't do this now, memory fades very quickly."

Oda connected her family's suffering during WWII to the present-day ICE raids devastating immigrant communities:

"They're taking children from their parents, taking people from their work. One of my good friends at the San Fernando Community Center said, 'I think they're going to call me, knock on our doors too.' This has hit our community very hard because we don't feel safe."

Reading from her father's 1943 diary, she said, "He wrote, 'I want to believe that goodness exists in this country. I want to believe that there are people with good judgment who believe in justice and democratic principles.' I am calling upon all of us to end this miserable situation."

Lynne, a Claremont College graduate student whose family was incarcerated during WWII, said, "My family was incarcerated during WWII. There are so many parallels between what happened to my grandparents and what I see happening today on the streets of Los Angeles. We need to call it unjust and mobilize, come together and use our shared history to push us forward."

She sharply criticized the Democratic Party's complicity. "The American political system is set up so that the people don't really have a choice in what happens."

Patrick, a worker with the National Parks Service for seven years, commented on Trump's attacks on federal programs and workers. "My branch chief as well as upper leadership, they have actually said that we are running at below critical levels."

Concerned about the cuts, he emphasized, "I still have a job, but that can change at any moment. Each of us is operating and carrying the jobs of at least five to six people."

Patrick's family saw the horrors of imperialism: "My grandparents were Nisei, second-generation Japanese Americans. They were placed in internment camps in Jerome and in Gila."

He drew the same parallel as many others. "I'm having to see what my grandparents had to live through: the targeting of a specific ethnic group based on color of skin and surnames being rounded up and being placed in internment camps and potentially being sent out of this country when all they're doing is trying to make a living. Being a veteran myself, fourth generation Japanese American and half Hispanic, that's something I tell my kids, and my kids also said they won't stand for it."

From WWII to today: A legal continuity of state repression

The JANM rally reflected a broader national resistance. Two weeks ago, in Dublin, California, Japanese American groups protested Trump's plan to convert the former Federal Correctional Institution—a women's prison shuttered in 2024 for decades of systemic sexual abuse—into an ICE detention center.

In El Paso, Texas, the administration has opened a new detention facility at Fort Bliss, a military base once used to imprison Japanese Americans during WWII, reigniting collective trauma. The same infrastructure used for mass incarceration in the 1940s is being repurposed to carry out new acts of repression.

The administration is actively invoking the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, the same law used during WWII to justify the imprisonment of Japanese Americans. This archaic statute allows individuals to be detained as "enemy aliens" without due process. Today, Trump wields it to justify mass deportations and indefinite detention.

Internal ICE documents estimate over 60,000 immigrants are currently detained nationwide, with capacity expanding as shuttered prisons reopen. Images displayed at JANM juxtaposed

photos of Japanese American families boarding buses in 1942 with modern-day ICE roundups, evincing an eerie familiarity: families torn apart, rights stripped away, trauma echoing across generations.

During WWII, Executive Order 9066 authorized the incarceration of over 120,000 Japanese Americans, two-thirds of them US citizens. That crime, though justified under the false banner of wartime necessity, was carried out by the same capitalist state that exists today.

But Trump's trajectory is even more dangerous. His plan to rename the Department of Defense to the Department of War signals preparation for more war abroad and more repression at home. This is combined with a coup d'état in progress and the mass expansion of ICE detention centers.

Saturday's rally was both an act of remembrance and a warning. The same ruling class that carried it out in the 1940s is utilizing the machinery for mass repression today.

But memory alone is not enough. As Kyoko Oda emphasized, the lessons of history must be transformed into organization and struggle.

The defense of historical truth is inseparable from the fight for socialism. Trump's historical falsification mirrors global trends from Modi's Hindu nationalist rewrites in India to Bolsonaro's glorification of dictatorship in Brazil. Capitalist governments everywhere are erasing their crimes to prepare for new ones.

The working class is the only social force that can defeat fascism. It must take up this fight consciously and internationally. Only through the independent mobilization of millions, armed with historical clarity and socialist perspective, can the advance of dictatorship be halted.



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