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Blast From The Past

Oahu's First Island-Wide Plantation Strike Ended In Failure. But It Changed Hawaii Forever

Japanese laborers were unable to sway powerful plantation owners and hysterical English-language newspaper editors in 1909, but they set changes in motion that would dramatically shape modern Hawaii.

By Jessica Terrell / September 2, 2024

Reading time: 11 minutes.

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The Japanese laborers just needed to stop complaining. Demanding more money from plantation managers was preposterous, greedy — and totally unnecessary.

Sure, the \$18-a-month minimum wage for Japanese workers was significantly less than what their Portuguese and Puerto Rican counterparts made, Hawaii newspapers acknowledged in a series of highly critical stories about the plantation labor movement that dominated headlines in 1909.

And yes, white teachers in Hawaii were complaining that they could barely make ends meet on \$50 a month. But how, the decidedly anti-labor newspapers wrote, could Japanese laborers claim to be poor when postal data showed that many workers were sending money to families back home?

The plantation hands in Hawaii have “little or nothing to complain of,” the Pacific Commercial Advertiser wrote at the start of a large plantation strike in 1909, adding that any laborer who wasn’t making good money didn’t deserve it.

“They are unskilled, unthinking fellows, mere human implements, but a minority easily aroused by demagogues,” the paper stated.

SEVEN THOUSAND IDLE JAPANESE

NO DECEPTION OF IMMIGRANTS

BOARD OF IMMIGRATION WILL MAKE CLEAR SCALE OF WAGES AND PRICE OF LIVING IN HAWAII—DECIDE TO GIVE PUBLICITY TO ALL MATTERS BEFORE BOARD—MAY BRING PORTUGUESE VIA TRIBUTARY ROUTE—TO ADVISORY FOR EMPLOYERS WHO WANT LABOR.

The Board of Immigration will take every possible precaution to prevent the bringing of immigrants to Hawaii under false impressions or promises. The pay which will be given to those coming from Europe will be stated and in addition to this full information as to the cost of living. The prices of the various staples of food, which will be obtained by Special Agent A. J. Campbell, before he leaves for his trip, which will probably be in the China on next Monday. This was decided at the meeting of the Board of Immigration held on Saturday.

Another matter of importance which was decided at the meeting was that full publicity shall be given to all the matters taken up by the board. This matter was discussed and importance of immigration Richard has stated that information might be given freely by any member of the board at any time. This policy finds a great contrast to that which has been in vogue in the past.

At the meeting on Saturday Special Agent Campbell was instructed to familiarize himself as much as possible with all the local conditions under which the immigrants would be placed on their arrival in this Territory, also to look carefully into the regulations which have been considerably changed since the last Portuguese came brought here. He will consult with Portuguese Consul Casavero in relation to the laws of Portugal in regard to emigration, in order that there may be no conflict of any kind and will, if yet no other request have been made

RIOT AT KAHUKU; ALL OAHU STRIKES; JAPS TO EMIGRATE

DRUNKEN STRIKERS TEAR DOWN SMOKESTACK OF PUMPKIN PLANTATION BUT WAIMANALO UNDER STRIKE—SOUTH AMERICAN HOMES PROMISED IDLE MEN.

Alia Japanese on strike and have left plantation. Strike breakers doing the work. Waikeolu-Hinohoe identical with that at Alia. Ewa—all Japanese walked out this morning. Waimanalo—All Japanese will out. Waikeolu—All Japanese walked out this morning. Yonkeolu same. Kahuku—all Japanese still out. In taking and destruction. Waimanalo—Liquor stores demand for better wine. 7,500 Japanese on strike; 1,000 strikers in the city; 1,100 strikers at work; about 1,000 more strikers were immediately available.

Managers Andrew Akaka and some others to have this morning, calling for police protection, deterring the attack on the pumping station and deterring more serious, and that by locking that some of the strikers were

BAKERS IN JAIL

BAD CHECK MAN HAS WIFE AND CHILD IN CHICAGO—ARREST BY FEDERAL AUTHORITIES.

Raymond M. Baker, who has passed a number of bad checks in this city and in San Francisco and who first became notorious through having married Mrs. Eva Wallace of San Francisco, the attached bride of Charles Howard, connected with Kerr & Company of this city, was arrested this morning on a charge of bigamy. The arrest was made by the local United States Marshal on a warrant sworn to by U. S. District Attorney R. W. Woodman.

When questioned in regard to the matter by a Star reporter a few days ago Baker admitted that the statement made in regard to his having a wife were false and said, "It is all a mistake." When questioned this morning by Hecobson, who asked him if he had obtained a divorce from his wife in Chicago, Baker refused to answer.

URIU FARGE IS SMOOTHED OVER

(Associated Press Cable to The Star.)
SAN FRANCISCO, May 21.—The matter of the landing at this port of Admiral Uriu of His Imperial Japanese Majesty's Navy, has been settled in a friendly manner and the Admiral has proceeded East. The master of the T. K. K. S. Nippon Maru was charged with having illegally landed Uriu as the latter had left the steaming on one of the U. S. Naval flags provided by officers of the U. S. Navy, as a matter of courtesy to the distinguished foreign visitor, without first having obtained the sanction of the customs authorities.

PLAGUE REAPPEARS

CARACAS, May 21.—Bubonic plague has made a reappearance in this city.

CONTINUOUS SHAKES

OAKLAND, May 21.—Continuum earthquakes are being felt here and the populace is much alarmed, many leaving the city.
WASHINGTON, D. C., May 21.—The Senate today defeated the proposed free number amendment to the tariff.
WASHINGTON, D. C., May 21.—Colonel Yeaman has been appointed Brigadier-General, U. S. A.
WASHINGTON, D. C., May 21.—In the Senate today Senator Owen severely scored the sugar combine.
WASHINGTON, D. C., May 21.—John Hayes Tallmadge has declined the ministry to China.
WASHINGTON, D. C., May 21.—The House has passed the Philippine tariff bill.
GALSBURG, May 21.—Chief Justice Scott of the Supreme Court of the State of Illinois died in this city this morning as the result of an operation for appendicitis.
WINNEPEG, May 21.—The coal miners strike affecting British Columbia has been settled by compromise.

FOUR NEW CITIZENS

PRIVATE COUNSEL

Most newspapers in Hawaii strongly opposed the 1909 strike by Japanese plantation workers, reporting on the events with little effort to even appear objective. (Screenshot/Newspapers.com)

Hawaii's labor movement would eventually unite the ethnic communities that plantation owners had tried to keep segregated, and that played a huge role in the development of Hawaii's unique local identity. But a century ago, if newspaper editors had their way, there would have been no unions or labor movement at all.

More than 7,000 Japanese laborers walked off their jobs in the cane fields across Oahu in 1909, in a highly organized and unprecedented show of force.

On one side were Japanese laborers who formed an organization that was essentially the first Hawaii plantation union, a Japanese-language

newspaper and several Japanese men in a unique position to advocate for fellow immigrants with few legal rights.

Special Series

Some things never change. This series looks back at issues and events that seem to keep going decade after decade. What can we learn from how we've handled things in the past?

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On the other side were the plantation owners, the territorial government and pretty much every English-language paper in operation at the time. People worried about bias in the media today would be rightfully scandalized to read the stories published in Hawaii in 1909.

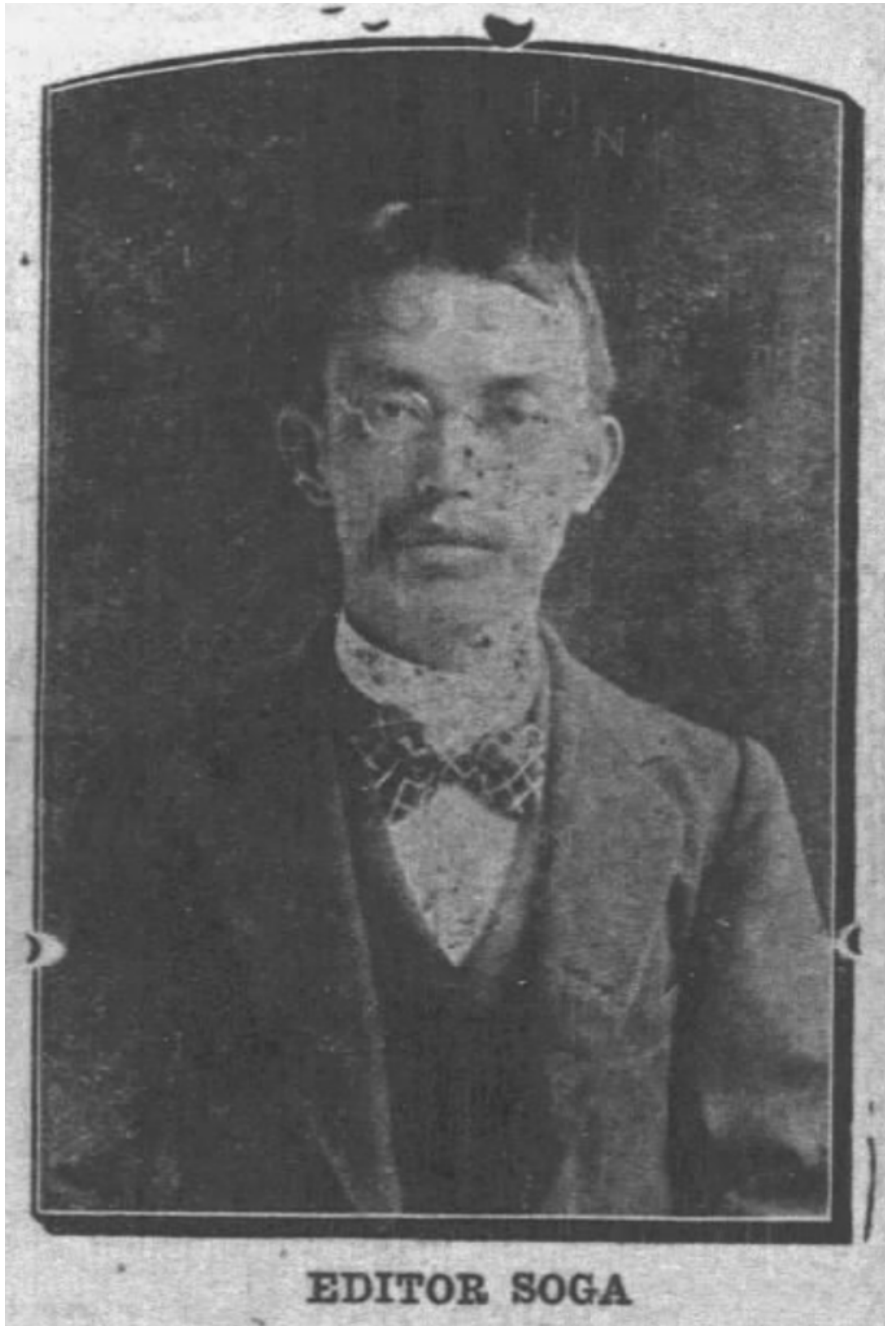
The strike fizzled out after government officials — in close cooperation with plantation owners — raided the office of a pro-labor Japanese-language newspaper, arrested dozens of strikers and put multiple strike leaders on trial for conspiracy.

But it was the start of a movement that would dramatically change Hawaii in decades to come.

An Eye For Injustice

The story of one of Hawaii's most significant early labor strikes is also the story of several remarkable men who came together at a tumultuous time in the islands' history.

The first Japanese workers arrived in Hawaii in the 1860s, but large waves of immigration really began in 1885 as plantations turned to Japan to solve their worker shortage. By the early 1900s, Japanese immigrants made up the bulk of the laborers in Hawaii's cane fields.



Fred Makino, the son of an English businessman and a Japanese mother, moved to Hawaii in his early 20s and opened a drugstore in Honolulu after working on several plantations. He quickly became a go-to person in the community for Japanese laborers struggling with immigration or legal issues.

Yasutaro Soga was a Tokyo-born journalist and social activist who published a Japanese-language paper in

Hawaii called the Nippu Jiji.

Motoyuki Negoro moved from Japan to California as a teenager, and was one of the first three people to earn a law degree from the University of

California, Berkeley, but was unable to practice law in Hawaii because he was not a U.S. citizen.

Makina, Soga and Negoro helped form the Japanese Higher Wages Association after trying in various ways to help laborers who worked long hours for little pay and had few resources to turn to for help.

Workers had already tried striking for better labor conditions on several plantations (the first known plantation strike in Hawaii was actually in the 1840s) but most strikes had been confined to a single plantation or brutally shut down before they even got started. In 1889, Katsu Goto — a former-plantation worker who opened the first Japanese-owned store on Hawaii island and was an advocate for laborers — was lynched.

Then in January 1909, after a series of articles in the Nippu Jiji advocating for change, a group of more than 1,000 laborers met in Makiki and passed a resolution calling for higher wages from the Planters' Association.

An article in the Sunday Advertiser tried to argue that Japanese laborers were better off than white workers because they were able to stick with the “simplicity of life” whereas white workers wanted better clothes, food and modern transportation — all expenses that kept them from getting ahead. (Screenshot/Newspapers.com)

OPEN THREATS OF VIOLENCE IN THE NIPPU JIJI

Denouncing the Hawaiian planters as liars, fools and idiots, declaring that they are preying upon the flesh and blood of the Japanese laborers, and calling in unmistakable language upon the laborers to commit acts of violence, the editor of the Nippu Jiji, the Japanese yellow journal of Honolulu, is preparing the way for his own prosecution or deportation. The Jiji is getting violent in its language and has now gone to the point of urging the murder of his two rival editors—Sheba, of the Shinpo, and Kimura, of the Chronicle.

deplorable condition on the plantations? It is a disgrace to the Japanese race to do so. We shall never enjoy our full rights and privileges until we exterminate these planters' spies. Nip the weed in the bud or the time will come when even an ax will be of no use."—Correspondence, published January 11.

Personal Abuse.

"The manager of Pacific plantation even though he is a koto, a foreigner, is a man with a human face but with the heart of a brute."

Result Is Threats.

As a result of such articles, as quoted, the lives of Messrs. Sheba and Kimura are threatened. On Tuesday last, the

Labor organizers complained that translations of stories in the pro-labor newspaper Nippu Jiji were wildly inaccurate. (Screenshot/Newspapers.com)

Early English-language newspaper coverage characterized the effort as a movement "engineered chiefly by storekeepers in Honolulu, backed by a few professional agitators, who look only to their own selfish interests and are careless of the suffering and privation that may result from their advocacy of a strike."

The papers also took to publishing outrageously bad translations of Nippu Jiji articles, claiming that the paper was calling for the execution of rival Japanese-language newspapers that opposed a strike.

The editor of the Nippu Jiji, "the Japanese yellow journal of Honolulu, is preparing the way for his own prosecution or deportation," The Hawaiian Gazette wrote a few weeks after laborers signed the demand letter.

Labor organizers waited months for a reply from plantation owners, all while a steady stream of newspaper articles, invariably referring to the workers and organizers as "agitators," portrayed the effort as dangerous, selfish and misguided. Finally, in May, more than 1,000 workers with the Higher Wages Association voted to strike.

The Star is An Intelligent, Progressive Newspaper

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STAR
BUSINESS OFFICE

HAWAIIAN STAR

SECOND EDITION

VOL. XVII HONOLULU, HAWAII, MONDAY, MAY 10, 1909. No. 5387

EXPECT THE STRIKE WILL SPREAD

AIEA IS QUIET; AGITATORS WORKING EWA AND WAIPAHA

ALL QUIET AT AIEA—WAIPAHA WILL JOIN THE STRIKE, THIS INVOLVING ANOTHER PLANTATION—REPORTS TO GET A STRIKE OF THE WAIPAHA LABORERS AND TO BRING ABOUT A STRIKE ON EWA PLANTATION.

According to the best obtainable reports of the strike situation this afternoon, the agitators are working hard with a plan to call out the laborers of Waipahu, Ewa and other plantations round the island. In fact, the agitators are working to leave their rest free houses and clear out of the plantations. This would bring them to Honolulu, where of course there would be nothing for them to do.

A representative of The Star found it difficult to witness the plantations everywhere very quiet and orderly at present in the amount of higher wages. In other ways they are preparing for a long lock-out.

The Japanese laborers are striking for \$25 per month, on the basis of a dollar a day for each working day in the month. The wages received before they went out were \$15 per month. It is stated by the leaders that they would have been satisfied with \$22.50 per month, but since the plantation owners did not see fit to come to those terms they decided to go out for a higher wage still.

LEADERS ARE NERVELESS.

There are a dozen of the leaders who camped at Aiea. The strike does not appear to be altogether under the supervision of any one man. This is probably to provide for the management of the campaign in the event of the arrest or other detention of any particular selected leader of the strike or system of strikes which has been instituted in the lock-out at Aiea.

Royal D. Mead of the Planter's As-

WHO HIT M'GANNON? A SOLDIER'S STORY

FIFTH CAVALRY SERGEANT WRITES POLICE THAT HE AND HIS COMRADES SAW VICTIM "BADLY DONE UP" AND GAVE HIM A FEW DRINKS SHORTLY BEFORE HE WAS PICKED UP MORTALLY WOUNDED—THEY DID NOT STRIKE HIM.

The mystery of the death of M. J. McDaniel, who was killed on Monday, May 3, at the corner of Hotel and Hotel streets, is not yet solved. No satisfactory explanation as to how he was killed has been given.

The talk of Hotel street was that the man had been in a fight or was assaulted, and on Saturday this paper published an account of what was said by a Japanese bartender who declares a Chinese witness told him that a number of soldiers attacked McDaniel and that one of them struck him in the mouth, knocked him down, and that the latter jumped up and ran away up New-York street.

Harold A. Cornell, sergeant of Troop F, Fifth Cavalry, seeing this account, writes a statement to the police department to clear himself and others who were with him in town and in the neighborhood of any suspicion, and to state the facts of the case, his story from the fallen McDaniel, to be accompanied, if the Chinese witness could tell the facts of the case, his story to the Japanese bartender could have been for no purpose other than the mere joy of fighting.

Sergeant Cornell's statement by no means covers all the matters which were in the neighborhood of Hotel and Hotel streets at the time of the alleged assault on McDaniel.

Chief of Detective Joe Lee is not without the one enabled by any offer of reward for information leading to the identification of the Chinese witness who declared to have witnessed the assault of the bartender who is said to have taken the soldiers from the scene.

Sergeant Cornell's writing, statement to the police is to the following effect:

"I was in the Blues saloon (formerly the Hoffman at the maka-wai-ki corner of Hotel and Nuanuan streets) on Monday, May 3, McDaniel entered late. He appeared to be badly done up, having a black eye and several lacerations about the face. We gave him three or four drinks and left the saloon together. McDaniel went toward Nuanuan street and we (Cornell and other soldiers) went along Hotel street toward the street (Nuanuan street). Neither myself nor any of our comrades did anything to McDaniel, or saw of anyone striking him while in our company."

According to this voluntary testimony, then, McDaniel may be presumed to have received a black eye and other face lacerations before he received the wound that caused his death at the hospital.

The fracture of the skull found by the coroner's jury was not in the scalp of McDaniel's body, was over the forehead, and was not in the neck, and his coroner observed McDaniel's skull was fractured and fractured skull is of course impossible to think truth; and if the Chinese witness told the facts of the case, his story to the Japanese bartender could have been for no purpose other than the mere joy of fighting.

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CITY TO BE COOK

Major Fern and Sheriff Jarrett find, as a result of an inspection of Honolulu jail that a kitchen and an office, as well as other necessaries, will have to be furnished by or after July 1 when the City and County of Honolulu takes over the care and maintenance of the jail.

It was at first thought that the Territorial prison might continue to do the cooking for both the Territorial prison and the Honolulu jail and that the City and County would pay to the High Sheriff of the Territory the proportion of money necessary to cover the expense of food and its preparation for the Honolulu jail, but it is now ascertained that this could not be done, for what money might thus be paid by the City and County to the High Sheriff could not be applied, inasmuch as the expense, but would have to be covered over to the Treasurer of the Territory as a Territorial realization.

A separate office is also required for the City and County jail, for the office of the Territorial prison will, when the City and County takes charge, cease to keep 'em on Honolulu premises.

Taft Urges Laws for Philippines

(Associated Press Cable to The Star.)

WASHINGTON, D. C., May 10.—President Taft today sent a message to Congress in which he recommends legislation for the purpose of effecting improvement in conditions now existing in the Philippine Islands.

Turks' New Ruler Takes Possession

CONSTANTINOPLE, May 10.—The sword of State was today, with great ceremony, placed on the shoulders of the Sultan. The solemn function was performed in the Mosque Ayasofya, no foreigners being admitted. Later the new ruler signified the sword in public, thus taking possession of the empire.

Kidnapers Collapse When Sentenced

MERCER, May 10.—Daryl has been sentenced to life imprisonment and his wife to a term of twenty-five years in prison, for the kidnaping of Young White. Upon the sentence being imposed in court today, both husband and wife collapsed and had to be carried from the court room.

Off to Esquimault

SAN FRANCISCO, May 10.—The Japanese training vessel, consisting of the Asa and Furo, under command of Rear Admiral Ushida, the officers of which have been recently ordered with in this port, left this morning for Esquimault.

Five New Torpedoes

WASHINGTON, D. C., May 10.—Five have been completed for the construction for the United States Navy of five of the latest improved torpedo-boats.

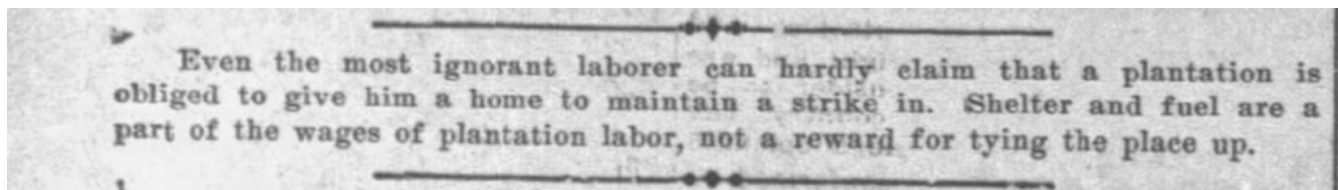
Taft Names Democrat

WASHINGTON, D. C., May 10.—Henry C. Carter, Democrat, was today

Newspapers warned that the strike would likely spread to more plantations, but also predicted that it would not last long as the Japanese workers had little resources to rely on. (Screenshot/Newspapers.com)

Most of the organizing had been done on individual plantations by laborers in touch with the Higher Wages Association, since gathering regularly in large groups was difficult. But within 10 days of the initial strike declaration, papers reported that every plantation on Oahu was impacted and thousands of laborers had been evicted from the plantations for refusing to work. Many walked for days to reach Honolulu, where the association worked with Japanese merchants to try to house and feed the workers and their families.

The march of families and workers with their belongings from Waipahu to Honolulu was like a “war-time exodus,” the Sunday Advertiser wrote.



Newspapers were hardly sympathetic to the labor strike. (Screenshot/Newspapers.com)

The papers were hardly sympathetic to the evicted workers. One Pacific Commercial Advertiser story went so far as to suggest that plantation owners conspire to fix the local price of rice. “Dear rice would soon exhaust a strike maintenance fund,” the paper wrote.

Breaking The Strike

When the strike began, Hawaii papers were quick to claim that it would not last long.

They also predicted that although Japanese laborers constituted an ever-growing portion of Hawaii’s population, the group would have little influence on politics in the islands — in 1909 or in the future.

Both prognostications would prove laughably wrong.

VOL. VII, NO. 334. HONOLULU, HAWAII TERRITORY, SUNDAY, MAY 23, 1909.—SIXTEEN

JAP STRIKERS APPEAR TO BE WEAKENING

Agitators Hurry Down to the Plantations to Brace Them Up.

LATEST FROM THE STRIKE.

From what could be gathered of the results of yesterday's developments in the strike situation, it is believed that the strikers are weakening and that they did not move toward Honolulu, especially from Waipahu and Aiea, with the alacrity hoped for by the agitators. For this reason, it is said that Makino, Negoro, the editor of the Nippu, and other subordinates, made a special trip in an auto not only to Aiea and Waipahu, but to Waiialua and Kahuku as well, in order to stir up more enthusiasm and to cause the leaders on the plantations to force the strikers into a firmer attitude toward the planters. A report reached this office late last night that only two hundred men came to town yesterday. Around the plantation offices yesterday it was understood that a very large number of the Japanese preferred not only to remain on the plantation, but to actually go back to their work, but some secular influence of the leaders



THE STRIKERS' HEADQUARTERS. —Advertiser Photo.

JAPANESE CONSUL IS MISREPRESENTED

Various wild rumors are rife on the streets in the Japanese sections of the city. Higher

JUVENILE COURT NOW IN ACTION

Judge Whitney Sends a Boy to

ARMY, NAVY AND MARINE CORPS

The Commercial Club Banquet

Multiple reports in May and June that the strike was weakening or coming to an end proved to be wrong. (Screenshot/Newspapers.com)

THE STRIKERS WEAKENING

EFFORT TO CONVINCING JAPANESE THAT THEIR LEADERS HAVE NOT
THEIR BEST INTERESTS AT HEART—ENDEAVOR TO KEEP CAP-
TAINS OF DISCORD OFF PLANTATION ESTATES—OAHU MAY RE-
TURN TO THE FIELDS—HAWAII MAY QUIT.

The strength of the strikers and the reach of the Higher Wages Association caused enough alarm for the heads of plantations on all islands to gather together and pledge to stand firm with “the Oahu contingent.” No concessions on wages were to be made on any island, they said.

Strike leaders like Makino, who was also writing articles for the *Nippu Jiji*, argued that the cause should be viewed through not only the American values of democracy and equality, but under the values of Christianity.

“Most of the capitalists of Hawaii are the descendants of missionaries,” the *Nippu Jiji* wrote, according to a translation published in the *Hawaiian Star*. “The wealth that was inherited by these capitalists was not intended to be spent leading a life of luxury and pomp ... Was it given to them to suck the blood of poor laborers in order they may live in luxury? We would say, no.”

In late May, the editor of the *Nippu Jiji* was charged with “disorderly conduct” for writing articles to incite the strike. The strike had seen several

acts of violence, including an attack on a Japanese worker who had not joined the strike. Makino and other strike leaders disavowed the violence, but that did little to appease the authorities.

A few days later, police arrested one of the labor leaders in Kahuku for running "afoul" of United States Postal Laws. Strikers had — according to the Hawaiian Star — tried to prevent the delivery of a Japanese-language newspaper siding with the plantation owners. They had also scrawled the word "traitor" on the papers.

Then in mid-June authorities arrested five of the main strike organizers on charges of conspiracy and "being disorderly persons." As part of the arrest, they raided the offices of the Nippu Jiji and broke into the newspaper safe without a warrant.

From San Francisco: Atlantic June 11
 For San Francisco: City of Stars June 11
 From Vancouver: June 15
 For Vancouver: June 23

EVENING BULLETIN

3:30 EDITION The wise merchant uses the Bulletin during summer and beats the man who lags

VOL. XI, NO. 423 12 PAGES—HONOLULU, TERRITORY OF HAWAII, SATURDAY, JUNE 12, 1909—12 PAGES PRICE 5 CENTS

MAKINO IS CHARGED

STRIKE LEADERS ARE INDICTED

Grand Jury Holds Negoro, Tasaka And Kawamura As Disorderly Persons—Makino And Four Of His Lieutenants Arrested On Conspiracy Charge

Makino, Negoro, Soga, Tasaka and Kawamura, the five principal strike leaders, were this morning arrested on warrants issued by Judge Robinson, charging them with conspiracy. In addition to this, indictments were returned by the Grand Jury against Negoro, Tasaka and Kawamura, charging them with being disorderly persons.

'QUAKE HORROR GROWS

MAREUILLES, France, June 12.—The dead in the Coast department, as the result of the earthquake, are estimated at 100. The town of St. Conast Rougues is practically destroyed. At Dardelles a church collapsed. The shock was felt from the Alps to the Atlantic ocean.

Attempt To Kill Sheba

Editor Sheba of the Hawaii Shinpo has had a narrow escape with his life this noon, after the adjournment of the Circuit Court.

Glass Gets New Trial

SAN FRANCISCO, June 12.—Louis Glass, former general manager of the Pacific States Telephone Company convicted in connection with the graft cases, has been granted a new trial.

HAWAII WINS IN RACE TO KAHULUI

KAHULUI, Maui, June 12.—(Special by Wire to the Bulletin.)—The yacht Hawaii crossed the line at 2:56:27, which, last night, thereby winning the Honolulu to Kahului race. The Kamehameha finished a close second, crossing the line at 3:39:38. The Gladys was third, finishing the run at 5:20:45. At 9:30 the Circuit Court in the Loka did not arrive until 9:22 which this morning.

THREATS OF VIOLENCE Submarine Goes Down

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia, June 11.—The schooner Krasnaya has been sunk in the Black Sea. The wreck was found during the trial and wreckage was discovered.

Aso and Soya Conspiracy?

SEATTLE, Wash., June 10.—The growers Aso and Soya asked today for Honolulu.

127 TO KIDNAP SULTAN.

CONSTANTINOPLE, June 12.—It is rumored here that an unsuccessful attempt was made today to kidnap Sultan Abdul Hamid.

(Screenshot/Newspapers.com)

Later that month, an Associated Press story claimed that the Japanese consul had told superiors in Japan that the strike was the work of “anarchists” and that plantation owners should be unyielding in their response. The consul said the next day that he’d made no such claims, and the Hawaiian Star published a story with multiple theories about where the false claim could have come from — none of them being that the story had been faked. All of this added to what had become a newspaper war between pro- and anti-labor publications.

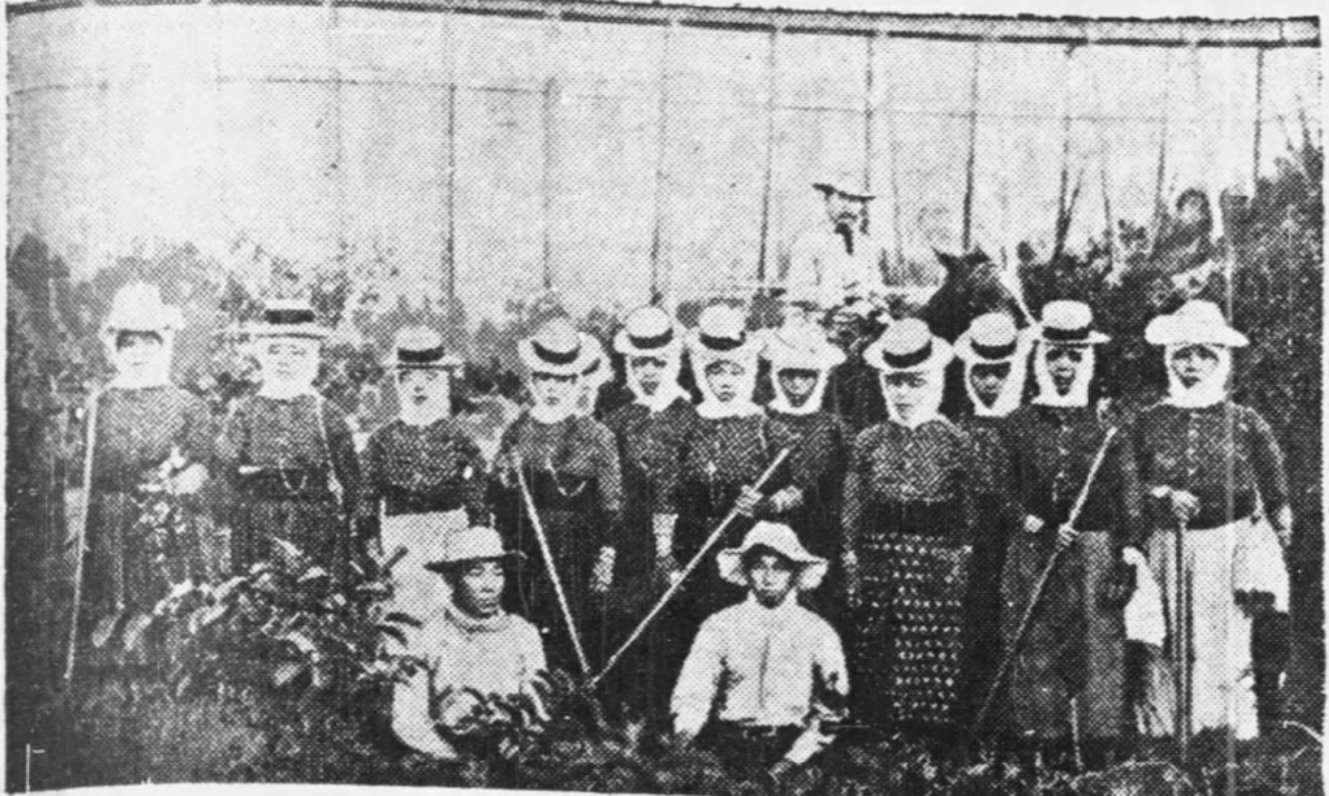
Something had to be done, The Hawaiian Star argued in June. Not about false stories in the English-language papers, but about that pesky “anarchist” publication the Nippu Jiji.

“The situation, seems, in fact, to be reaching a stage where, leaving all wage questions aside, these Japanese strike newspapers and their allies, have overstepped the line of what the community ought to tolerate, or the federal authorities allow,” the paper opined. “Is it thoroughly realized, how far the disrespect for the authorities is being cultivated?”

Lasting Legacy

The trial against the strike leaders, including the editor and publisher of the Nippu Jiji, lasted nearly a month. Partway through the trial, a member of the Higher Wages Association violently attacked the publisher of one of the main pro-plantation Japanese-language newspapers, further inflaming the situation. A few weeks later, the strike leaders were sentenced to 10 months in prison.

The arrests of the strike leaders — along with arrests of more than 50 other laborers over the course of the strike — did not fully stamp out the movement. But coupled with a successful effort to entice Chinese and Hawaiian workers to take the place of the Japanese laborers with higher temporary wages, plantation owners were able to end the strikes later that summer without making any concessions. They had won — or so it seemed at the time.



Japanese women laborers around the time of the 1909 strike. (Screenshot/Newspapers.com)

A few months after the strikes ended, Oahu plantations agreed to raise the wages of Japanese workers and made further agreements to build temples and improve living conditions.

The fight to improve the plantation system was far from over, and some of the most dramatic moments of Hawaii's labor movement were yet to come — including the Hanapepe Massacre of 1924, in which 16 Filipino workers and four police officers were killed on Kauai.

But as the [Center for Labor Education and Research at the University of Hawaii West Oahu points out](#), the strike was well organized and had long-lasting impacts. It effectively scared the sugar planters for years to come.

After his release from prison, the editor of the Nippu Jiji took a more conservative stance on the labor movement. Makino, the pharmacist, launched his own newspaper in response and became a well-known and sometimes controversial advocate for the Japanese community. The paper he founded, the Hawaii Hochi, printed its last edition in 2023.

At a meeting attended by more than 1,000 laborers near the start of the 1909 plantation strike, an English lawyer involved in the movement spoke passionately about the tone and motivation of newspaper coverage of the strike. Newspapers were calling for them to be arrested he said.

In the future, he predicted, sentiments would change. The strikers' descendants would point with pride to the fact that their fathers and grandfathers been a part of the 1909 strike.

A century later, with Hawaii often pointed to as having one of the strongest union forces in the nation, it's clear which side won out.

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