

2018 NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

◆ Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), AFL-CIO ◆

Ellison S. Onizuka Memorial Award



During his life, Ellison S. Onizuka encouraged students to dream big, set lofty goals, break barriers and literally reach for the stars. In that same spirit, APALA has removed barriers and inspired communities as they fought for worker rights, human rights, educational equity and advanced labor and Asian community partnerships.

Over their 25 year history, APALA, the first and only national organization of Asian and Pacific Islander (API) workers, was one of the first organizations within the American labor movement to advocate for immigrant rights, and to advance the organizing of immigrant workers. APALA has been at the forefront of supporting undocumented immigrant students, especially in demanding access to higher education, and uplifting the leadership of API undocumented youth.

APALA has brought together over a dozen API ethnic communities under one umbrella organization. Chinese garment workers, Japanese teachers, Filipino nurses, Vietnamese home care workers, Pacific Island construction workers, and South Asian government workers, have all have worked together in APALA to collaborate and fight for civil rights and economic justice. APALA has been influential in positioning the labor movement to support legalization for undocumented immigrants, understanding that worker's rights are advanced when all workers have rights, no matter their country of birth or immigration status.

The work APALA does to build power and bridges through education, representation, support and engagement is more important today than ever. With workers' safety under attack by the Trump Administration, APALA must continue standing up for workers and the communities in which they live. APALA leaders find themselves on the frontlines of the struggle against a climate of racism facing so many communities of color. This is seen with APALA advancing the cause of Dreamers, many of whom in the API community are too often overlooked.

Arlene Inouye, APALA National Executive Board Member and UTLA member, discussed how APALA organized in her community in advance of Donald Trump's Inauguration to create a climate of calm and solidarity. She recalled, "We actually made shields-- shielding against the Trump/Devos agenda, shielding against racism, sexism, xenophobia. We had an action setting the stage for Inauguration weekend. At 400 schools we had teachers and parents all holding up these shields before class to tell the community that we are standing with you; we wrap our arms around you; and we are not going to let them take you."

As APALA celebrates its first 25 years, its members go forward in communities across the country committed to ensure API voices are heard as part of the American conversation. They resist, organize and fight.