

Human and Civil Rights Award Winner



Arlene Inouye

Ellison S. Onizuka Memorial Award

AN EDUCATOR, LABOR LEADER, ACTIVIST, AND KEEPER OF CULTURE, ARLENE INOUYE has spent most of her life uplifting the plight and contributions of Asians and Pacific Islanders to American society.

Fueled by her own background and upbringing, Ms. Inouye has been driven to transform public education and the union into a force for societal change and as catalysts in the movement for racial, educational and social justice. She quite literally has used her voice and talents to bring voice to her students and community.

As the secretary for United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), Arlene wrote these words in the LA Progressive 2020, reflecting on how her past drove her to a role in union leadership: *“And now, at the age of 70 years, I am once again with a team fighting for the safety and health of hundreds of thousands in LA (Los Angeles). I couldn’t be more honored and proud. We enter a new phase for UTLA, with a deeper and more expansive role and commitment to the communities in which we serve, the students we love and care about. As they say in Japanese ‘Gambatte’—fight on, and as a proud union member—‘Solidarity Forever’ for truly we need both.”* She served as the bargaining team co-chair during the UTLA 2019 contract negotiations, which led to one of the most historic educator strikes in national history, securing a plethora of social justice wins for students across the district.

Ms. Inouye reflects on the trauma her family experienced as a direct result of being incarcerated in the World War II internment camps and how it relates to the systemic racism that we see today in this country. To disrupt systemic racism, she is currently working with the UCLA Asian American Studies Center on the AAPI Multimedia Textbook project and is a strong advocate of ethnic studies programs.

As a bilingual speech and language specialist, Ms. Inouye works hard to uplift Asian and Pacific Islander (API) voices in her work. A member of the NEA Asian and Pacific Islander Caucus (APIC), she served as a California regional director. She has encouraged and empowered many of NEA’s Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) members to become union leaders in various capacities. Current APIC chair Jodi Kunimitsu reflected, “I can recall when I first started to become involved in NEA and APIC, Arlene was one of the people who really encouraged me to step into leadership roles. She has always been so supportive, and I’m inspired by the work she does to fight for educators and students daily.”

Her work extends beyond education and into the labor movement. She is a “Lifetime Warrior” and former Executive Board member of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), which recognized her in 2017 with the Philip Vera Cruz Lifetime Achievement Award. APALA gives this award to an outstanding Asian American and Pacific Islander union organizer whose career honors the memory of the historic labor and community leader Philip Vera Cruz.

Arlene Inouye’s work embodies the spirit of Ellison S. Onizuka, the first AAPI NASA astronaut who died aboard the Challenger space shuttle in 1986. He often visited public schools to encourage youth to work hard to achieve their dreams. Ms. Inouye is a tireless advocate for improving educators’ working and students’ learning conditions across Los Angeles.