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Organizing for racial and economic justice during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Experiences from the Chinese Canadian community in Toronto

Justin Kong

Justin Kong is a labour and community organizer, he lives in Scarborough with his family.

In this article, I share my experiences involved in organizing around racism and for social and economic justice broadly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article specifically focuses on some of my experiences involved in a small, grassroots, community-based organization with a focus on anti-racism, workers' rights and social justice as the Executive Director at [the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter](#) (hereafter CCNCTO) from July 2018 to May 2021. CCNCTO is an organization of Chinese Canadians in the City of Toronto that promotes equity, social justice, inclusive civic participation, and respect for diversity. CCNCTO has an extensive history working in racial justice and advocacy including being a key part of the coalition for winning redress for Chinese head-tax survivors from the Canadian government.

Manifesting Histories of Anti-Asian Racism and Sinophobia in the COVID-19 Pandemic

It is hard to find a place to start when writing about racism in Canada and certainly the Asian Canadian experiences of racism. From the earlier histories of Chinese head-tax and exclusion to the ongoing scapegoating of Chinese and other Asian Canadians for some of the pronounced social and economic issues of our times, Asian Canadian communities have continued to migrate to Canada only to find an uneasy reception. Growing up in Toronto, I witnessed the ways in which anti-Asian racism manifested itself in social, economic and labour market exclusion of my own family and those around us. The occasional “Ch*** go back to China” by white people being only the most explicit expression.

It was my experiences with racism as a Chinese Canadian that drew me to working at CCNCTO. During my time working there, I learned about histories of Asian exclusion, but also the histories of resistance, of Chinese and Asian communities fighting back, often working in solidarity with other racialized communities, and how through those struggles ripped from the claws of white supremacy the many things we now enjoy: citizenship rights, human rights, economic advancement and many more. While anti-racism advocacy was always part of the work, when I started working at CCNCTO, I also found myself organizing to combat the rise of reactionary attitudes

in my own community: rising tides of Islamophobia, anti-Black racism and anti-refugee attitudes that were being fomented by far right forces often with [discreet support from establishment Conservatives](#) aimed at building support in suburban communities.



Justin Kong speaking at Toronto City Hall on concerns around the rise of anti-Asian and anti-Chinese racism along with other anti-racist advocates and elected city officials. January 29th, 2020, Toronto.

In January 2020, a mysterious new virus was just making the headlines. It was first detected in Wuhan, China and instantly, just as they had during SARs – Chinese and other Asian people, and those who could be confused for being Chinese, were immediately considered potential carriers of a newly found disease. Videos of supposed ‘bat-eating’ tapped into deeply held prejudices against Chinese and Asian peoples. Many anti-racist advocates and respected leaders from the Chinese community had seen this type of racism during Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 and how it impacted Chinese and other Asian Canadian communities: the way in which our children were targeted, the way in which Chinese communities and businesses floundered as they were abandoned as danger zones and the general abuse of Chinese and Asian Canadians generally throughout society. There was quick community mobilization and we joined others at Toronto City Hall to denounce the rise of anti-Asian racism.

This denunciation was important in showing consensus and commitment that we would not allow anti-Asian racism to be accepted; the press event made news across Canada and the world – the fact that we had the reach it did was a result of the work of histories of struggles against racism.

Corresponding with the calls to stop the anti-Asian rhetoric around the new virus, were calls from Chinese Canadian communities that saw the Canadian government and our public health authorities [not doing enough to combat](#) and prevent the spread of this new virus. Through Chinese language media and news from family contacts in China, many Chinese Canadians already recognized the seriousness of this new virus and

the effectiveness of drastic action that was being taken in China to contain the virus. Therefore, it struck them as strange and frustrating as to why the Canadian government was not taking more decisive action to combat this new virus.

主办单位：平权会多伦多分会
Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto

健健康康迎元宵
A COMMUNITY FORUM
ON PUBLIC HEALTH:
Flu Season and Coronavirus

和加拿大卫生专家了解如何保护自己，
跟卫生部门讨论医疗政策。
Learn public health practices & discuss healthcare policies.



了解如何正确地穿戴口罩。
每人能免费拿**5**个医疗口罩。
Learn how to appropriately use medical masks when you are sick. Free mask!

讲员 **Speakers:**
 多伦多公共卫生局 
City of Toronto - Public Health Dept.
其他公共卫生局部门和医疗专家
Other Public Health Professionals & Health Dept.

日期 **Date:**
二月八号
February 8th 2020

地点 **Location:**
Woodside Square
(Stage Area: between RBC & Shoppers Drug Mart)
1571 Sandhurst Cir,
Scarborough, ON



时间 **Time:**
1:30 - 2:30PM 活动介绍
CCNCTO Introduction
2:00 - 3:00PM 和卫生专家了解如何保护自己，讨论医疗政策。
Discussion with Public Health
3:00 - 4:00PM 专家示范戴口罩和口罩拍发。
Mask demonstration & distribution
4:00 - 4:30PM 新年祝福和其他活动
Cultural activities & good wishes

财神祝福大家新年快乐和健康
Fortuitous Greetings from the God of Fortune Bestowing Health and Good Fortune!

CCNCTO community Poster promoting a public health event, Feb 8th, 2020, Scarborough, Toronto.

Not too long after the event at city hall, CCNCTO organized a community meeting with Toronto's Chief Medical Officer at a local mall in early February which aligned with the last day of Lunar New Year celebrations. At that time there was vigorous debate around whether or not masks were effective at containing the virus and many people in the community had been actively pursuing masks. Our organization had been able to secure a shipment of masks, and was eager to distribute them at the event to get them into the hands of the community. However, at the same time, health authorities had not yet made a declaration on whether masks were helpful in combating the new virus. As organizers of the events we found ourselves in the uneasy situation of responding to community needs and ensuring we weren't undermining public health directives during this sensitive time.



Justin Kong [speaking with CBC News](#) about the report on the rise of anti-Asian racism during COVID-19. March 23, 2021, Toronto.

Whether it was differing views within the community about whether racism or public health should be the immediate concern, or the ordeal around the masks- these discussions served as an important lesson for me in reflection, on not only how migrant communities participate differently to shape civic society but also how essential that we have civic institutions and communities that are invested in mutual learning, dialogue and information sharing.

As the new virus quickly spread across the globe from novel virus into a global pandemic, our work around the issue of racism became enjoined by public health controls, shutdowns and pandemic support. Anti-Asian racism and other forms of racism however would intensify with the pandemic with continued blame on how Chinese people were the cause of the virus, to racist and absurd notions from leading Conservative politicians that Canada's Chief Medical Officer, a Chinese Canadian, was actually a foreign agent of the Chinese government. Beyond these high-level political incidents were the frequent and unabated everyday attacks on Chinese and other Asian

communities across Canada throughout the pandemic – from frontline workers to the elderly – our organization would go on to track thousands of instances of anti-Asian attacks and racism throughout our nation-wide platform www.covidracism.ca

It is also notable that as many Asian Canadians re-awoke to the rising tides of anti-Asian racism, long standing struggles for racial justice led by Black and Indigenous communities had also intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. I remember marches in solidarity with Breanna Taylor, George Floyd and others were some of my first-time taking part in mass actions since the onset of the pandemic. It is important to bear in mind that without #blacklivesmatters and #idlenomore, #StopAsianHate, our movement would probably not have had the scope and reach that it did. For Asian folks who are just re-awakening to anti-Asian racism, it is critical to understand how our struggles are intimately interwoven with those of other racial groups and oppressed peoples. Understanding this is, of course, easier than realizing it in practice. The very real contradictions of racial capitalism and how it manifests between racialized and working communities and the masses across the globe, where we are pitted at each other's throats for the table scraps, can only be resolved through practice.

During the pandemic, I felt really grateful for opportunities to begin some of that work locally, to address the anti-Black racism that exists within our community and also legacies of solidarity and joint struggle. At CCNCTO during the COVID-19 pandemic we started dialogue with members of our organization to learn about the history and struggle of Black communities for liberation. We invited guests from the US who had been long involved in doing the work of trying to build multi-racial, working class solidarity amongst Asian communities with Black and other racialized groups.

As we think how we must collectively fight against the rising tides of racism, the growing Sinophobia that arises from deepening geopolitical tensions and the deepening inequalities of our times, it dawns on me more than ever that our solidarity must be a practice. It must be grounded in the concrete real material concerns of working people and worked through the politics of the everyday: of work and livelihoods, of subways and LRTS, of rooming houses and NIMBYism in the politics of rent, mortgages and growing housing unaffordability -- just a few among many others. Only by asking how we build interracial solidarity through the material challenges and issues facing working people in a diverse space like Toronto can we build the power to fight to win and combat the crises looming on the horizon.

Organizing with Chinese Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In addition to anti-racism work, a key part of our work during the pandemic was organizing in support of workers in the community. All of a sudden the pandemic transformed restaurant workers, grocery store workers, care workers, cleaners and other service workers into “essential workers”. In fact, they were always essential and their labour was always critical to our society -- it just took a pandemic to make them visible. At CCNCTO we had been organizing with Chinese food workers prior to

the pandemic and the pandemic rapidly changed our work. While we had focused on organizing for addressing violations of workers' rights such as wage theft and workplace harassment, the pandemic required us to shift our work into a very different space. While wages and working conditions remained important as workers bemoaned low wages, it was ultimately survival in the workplace and ensuring that one was protected from the virus work that became the overwhelming prerogative that drove our work.



Press conference with the Decent Health Network, the Iranian Canadian Congress and CCNCTO calling on Premier Doug Ford for emergency sick leave, and the Federal government to expand EI Eligibility for all workers to stop the new virus. March 12, 2020, Queens Park, Toronto.

CCNCTO would support lobbying for paid sick days and income supports, organize information chat groups to share with frontline workers, lead frontline worker vaccination efforts and provide PPE and other protective equipment to directly support the 'frontline'. A report detailing some of this work and the experiences of these workers can be found here: <https://www.ccnctoronto.ca/frontline-report>.

Essential workers in the Chinese and other Asian communities were in the uniquely unenviable position of being both exposed to the virus in their workplaces and being seen as the cause of the virus. We heard from health care workers who were spat on after a long shift in the early days when PPE was still scarce in our hospital system; grocery store workers who faced down racist anti-maskers when they tried to keep their workplaces safe for coworkers and customers.

What was so frustrating about this was that despite how much essential work was being conducted by the Chinese workers and other Asian workers across the GTA, they

nonetheless remained marginalized and discriminated against. It struck me that the racial currents and logics were often unable to comprehend these subject positions of Chinese and other Asian frontline workers. While media and right-wing voices continued to blame Asian people for the spread of the virus, they also doubled down on how Chinese and Asians were the ones to be blamed, whether it was for housing prices, or growing unaffordability. When Chinese and Asians were not outright scapegoated, they were certainly not portrayed in the public imagination as 'proper' labouring subjects deserving of protection of the law, unions or government support. The organizing work that I encountered every day and public and media discourse that we heard were at constant disjuncture, the two often felt almost irreconcilable. A prime example of this was when the City of Toronto released data and noted that East Asians actually had lower rates of COVID-19 infection than whites.

As I look back on my work at CCNCTO, I thought of the many East Asian personal service workers, grocery workers and other frontline workers who I encountered during the pandemic (our organization outreached to more than five thousand frontline workers across the GTA throughout the pandemic) and the toll that the pandemic had taken on them, and how they worked throughout the pandemic with constant fear and uncertainty, sometimes wearing two, three masks, barely able to breathe. I thought of the people returning from China and other parts of Asia who voluntarily self-isolated for weeks and supported their neighbors in doing so – long before the government made isolation mandatory. I thought about workers from other racialized and working class communities who similarly worked through the difficulties of the pandemic and we had all been let down by our governments, sometimes taken advantage of by employers and neglected by those in power. I thought of all these people and above all I thought of how, throughout the pandemic, our governments and society at large failed racialized workers, how it failed working people, how it failed poor people and how it failed those who were the most marginalized. It brought to full relief for me that there can be no anti-racist, no social justice movement without these people at the core: the essential workers, the migrant workers, the undocumented and the masses labouring at the peripheries throughout our society and the world -- Let us never forget that it is these people that sustain us and that we have a duty to fight together to demand our collective liberation, to demand justice and to ensure that, as we leave this pandemic, we build a world of solidarity and not racial injustice, a world of peace and not war, and a world that works for the many and not just the few.

