

## Why Care about Them?

By Ali Wong

The first day of Asian American Studies 116 was the first time I had ever heard about the ASSI boycott and KIWA as an organization. Since KIWA stands for “Korean Immigrants Workers Advocate,” specifically labeling their advocacy for “Korean Immigrants,” I wondered how and why they chose to take on the ASSI campaign. Only 6 out of the 56 suspended workers were Korean, while the rest were Latino.

In Koreatown, restaurants and supermarkets sit on top as the largest industries. Before the ASSI boycott, KIWA was concerned with the restaurant industry’s treatment of immigrants. Knowing that the supermarket industry used similar exploitative tactics, KIWA had been looking at the supermarket industry even before ASSI requested their help. According to Jessica Kim, 7 major supermarkets in Koreatown were employing more than 1,000 workers. KIWA already had contact with Korean workers interested in organizing before the ASSI boycott began.

But why did the Korean immigrants care if the Latino immigrants were treated worse, paid less and faced worse working conditions? After all, Korean immigrants have a strong sense of ethnic solidarity and needed each other to survive. Their Korean bosses were giving them the better jobs such as stocking shelves, running the cash register and fish section. But even though employers treated them better, they still did not give them benefits, contracts and a living wage.

Korean immigrant workers' economic status mirrors that of Latino immigrant workers and stands on polar opposites with Daniel Rhee's wealth. Culturally, they have a lot more in common with the Latino workers than ASSI supermarket employers. Like the Latino immigrant workers, Korean immigrant workers experience poverty, miseducation about their rights and constant fear.

When I was answering the question, "Why should Koreans care?," I kept thinking of Pastor Niemuller's famous poem that ends:

"They came after the Jews, and I was not a Jew, so I did not protest. They came after the Trade Unionists, and I was not a Trade Unionist, so I did not protest. They came after the Roman Catholics, and I was not a Roman Catholic, so I did not protest. Then they came after me, and there was no one left to protest."

It's important for immigrants to band together because they are so vulnerable as individuals. If they do not stand up for each other, they will continue to be disempowered.

And why, as privileged students of UCLA, should we care? Other than the fact that morally, the Rhee company is wrong, what exactly do we have at stake in this whole campaign? As Asian American Studies students, we owe the existence of our major to

students who risked their lives and bodies in Campbell Hall. We take great pride in the legacy of Philip Vera Cruz and Filipino workers' contribution to the Delano grape strike. To ignore an opportunity to participate in a grassroots multiethnic movement would ignore the foundation of Asian American Studies and, in many ways, our own families. For most of us, our ancestors or parents were or are immigrant workers who have battled with dehumanizing working conditions.

In every significant protest in history, students have risen up as important contributors. Students generally do not have children and, therefore, heavy financial burdens or pressure to stay out of jail. They have more freedom to take the dramatic risks necessary to make change. Because they are young, they generally have fresher and more creative perspectives on methods of change.

In a discussion with Kathleen Cleaver, I asked her about solutions to apathy. She told me "You have to be dramatic." When you ride the subway system in New York, you can always see people crowded around something. That crowd attracts you and you have to go see whatever they are paying their attention to. Maybe it is a musician, dancer or magician, but it is certainly someone who has succeeded in gathering an audience. Black Panthers passed out flyers with guns in their arms in order to get people's attention to their cause. One of the girls in my theater group wears a full-suit bear costume when she passes out show flyers on Bruinwalk, and people respond a lot more.

Using cameras and computers at the IMPL, UCLA students could make a short film or educational documentary about the ASSI boycott. The movie, *Dirty, Pretty Things*, interprets two immigrant workers experiences as a disturbing mystery-horror story. Released in a trend of fairy-tale like mainstream immigrant films, *Dirty, Pretty Things*, portrayed the scary reality of what it is like to be a vulnerable immigrant. The short film or educational documentary could show what it's like to be threatened, illegal, harassed, paranoid and accused of bringing shame to your own kind.