

What Is the Significance of the Assi Workers' Campaign for Asian American Students?

By Christina Kaoh

Three years ago, twenty Assi workers walked off their jobs, frustrated that the employer had reduced their hours from full, eight-hour workdays. From this significant action, momentum has only grown to support the now sixty workers who have been suspended unjustly from their jobs. Gaining the support of the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA), the workers launched a campaign that challenges the power structure and race relations between workers and the employer and within the workers themselves.

Unfamiliar with the culture, unable to speak the language, and often starting from the bottom, immigrants face many challenges in a new environment. In such an environment, immigrants seek the protection and security of a familiar community — one comprised of immigrants of the same ethnic background. Therefore, immigrants create a sense of community in which they live near one another, work with one another, and employ one another.

However, is this really community? Immigrants may have little choice in where they work because of language barriers and lack of skills. Employers, once immigrants themselves, see new immigrants as exploitable labor and employ them under the guise of helping a fellow immigrant. The creation of ethnic-owned and employed establishments may arise out of the immigrants' anxieties of traveling outside their community and out of the ease of employing recently immigrated labor. If immigrants rise to the upper ranks of society, they lose sight of the class struggle and in turn become the oppressive force on newly arrived immigrants. Such is the case

in Koreatown, where Daniel Rhee, the Korean owner of Assi market, employed Korean and Latino workers who were struggling with their role as immigrants.

The launching of the campaign signified a huge change in the racial relations in Los Angeles. Instead of cowering to Daniel Rhee, Korean workers were standing up to another Korean and criticizing his exploitation of workers. In the Korean community, KIWA received much negative attention for creating a division between a Korean employer and Korean workers. Many felt that the organization was destroying the solidarity of Korean immigrants and Korean Americans as a whole. The organization received even more criticism when it incorporated the agenda of Latino workers into its campaigns (Nguyen, 29). This progressive attitude toward race relations is a step toward building class solidarity. Division along racial lines occurs frequently when workers are faced with the urgency of their situation. However, solidarity as a class and as exploited workers, regardless of race, is a necessity to change power relations.

KIWA faced difficulty in uniting Korean and Latino workers, who worked in the same establishments, but were divided by hierarchical structures. Koreans are given preferential jobs, such as waitress or cook, while Latinos are placed in lower paid jobs, such as busboy and dishwasher (Nguyen, 28). When employers create such racial divisions, they can gain support from the preferential group and create hostility between workers. Language barriers further divided the groups, as neither one could communicate with each other to address problems that arose in the workplace. Fighting against the stereotypes that each group harbored about the other, KIWA united the two groups with the use of translators explaining the circumstances that could perpetuate these stereotypes. Through education, they created understanding between the

workers about each other's background and situation, and raised the critical issues of how the employer treated them as workers, not just as Koreans or Latinos.

In its organizing, KIWA strives to empower the individual and build his or her skills as a leader and activist. Like many community-based organizations, KIWA creates a space for individuals to take leadership and voice their opinions. By taking on a responsibility, rather than attending a workshop or a class, individuals learn to organize a rally, confront the employer at the workplace, and create a plan to achieve a goal. Furthermore, workers experience the power of collective action as they work together across racial and gender lines in a common fight with members of their community, clergy, students, and other supporters. KIWA's hands-on approach for workers dispels the myth that Asian Americans and immigrant workers are easily exploited and passive. Instead, Asian Americans and immigrants rise from all levels as active and vocal members of the campaign. Workers, who were once dishwashers and those in the background, are given the chance to build themselves and take a forefront role in leading other people.

The Assi market campaign is a significant show of the power immigrants and Asian Americans wield as they challenge the often overlooked practice of people of color exploiting people of color. Often, people of color and immigrants struggle with the implications of living in a white-dominated society, therefore overlooking the conflicts that occur within and between communities of color. The Assi market campaign confronts these issues head on, regardless of the criticism it draws from the Korean community. KIWA and the workers examine the oppression created by people of color and its effects on racial relations in Los Angeles, as well as the need for understanding and cooperation between Koreans and Latinos in building class unity

among immigrant workers. Furthermore, KIWA organizers play less of a dominant role in the campaign in order to build leadership from within the constituency. Immigrants, and especially Asian immigrants, are considered docile and incapable of collective action. However, the Assi campaign is giving a voice to those immigrants and creating a visible presence of power for future immigrants.