

## Why Should Students Support the Assi Workers' Campaign for Justice?

By Grace Chen and Delphina Yuen

Assi Market is one of seven large markets in Koreatown. Despite the success of Assi Market, over the past year an employer/employee conflict arose as immigrant workers began picketing against the owner, Daniel Rhee, demanding social and economic justice. Immigrant workers with over fifteen years of employment learned to speak out and battle for human rights to prevail in their work force. Workers have not been acknowledged for their hard work and have been mistreated while working at the Assi Market, thus leading many immigrant workers to seek union representatives for their support on human rights. They have sought to create a union for themselves in order to receive benefits and fair wages as employees.

The sales and earnings received from any of the seven supermarkets in Koreatown have surpassed the incomes of a regular supermarket such as Ralphs. According to a Kroger press release in November 2003, it was reported that Ralphs and Safeway supermarkets had a gross profit margin of 26.39 percent with total sales of \$12.4 billion in the second quarter of 2003. If Assi and other Korean supermarkets have similar high earnings, this indicates that most of the money is geared towards the owners of the supermarket, leaving little for the immigrant employees. For example, employees who have worked at the Assi supermarket for the last fifteen years have started at minimum wage earning only to \$6.25 an hour. At such a low wage it would be impossible to support a family. In calculating their income, they would receive approximately \$13,000 annually, making it

exceedingly difficult to live. In addition, immigrant workers do not receive health benefits or a pension plan. Most workers are kept overtime, which benefits the market owners, but when they ask to get paid for overtime, it is not unusual for the boss to fire them on the spot. The workers are compensated so little for their hard work, and in some cases workers must also find additional jobs elsewhere in order to support their families. When an immigrant worker needs to work two jobs, ultimately this affects the worker's family as well, as the lack of parent/child quality time can eventually lead the children into problematic situations.

One benefit of this campaign in regards to human rights for immigrants is the workers' fight for healthcare through health benefits. In addition to the low wages received, workers at Assi Market receive no health benefits to assist them or their family members in times of medical needs. Without these benefits, many workers pay for their medical needs out of their own pockets, which can be expensive. If medical benefits are successfully won, the human rights campaign for immigrants will have succeeded, as these benefits will give the immigrants a sense of humanity. Receiving medical care will allow the employer/employee relationship to become improved, as immigrants will see the employer's concern for his employee and his/her family.

The fight for justice in the Assi Market campaign is one of validity, as foreigners who emigrate from other countries looking for better lives undoubtedly have the right to a better lives. Immigrants are willing to work in any place that will provide money sufficiently; however, when the pay is limited, then a problem occurs — a situation

evident with the workers of Assi Market. As the standard of living, especially in Southern California, is high compared to other states, a wage of \$6.25 per hour is nearly impossible to live on. In addition, medical benefits are crucial for any human being, as health is an essential part of life. Whether the workers of Assi Market succeed in gaining better wages or health benefits, the boycott is a call to improve human rights and is not a question of money or benefits, but rather one of humanity.