

How Do Race Relations in L.A. Koreatown Affect the Assi Workers' Campaign?

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In class I thought about the possible effects of the Assi Market workers' strike on the local community and came up with the question; how do race relations affect the Assi Market campaign?

There are two parts to consider when answering this question. First, there is the racial hierarchy within the community that places the livelihoods of Latinos and some Koreans at the mercy of the few Koreans who own the markets. This aspect of race relations is the cause of the problem. Daniel Rhee, who owns Assi Market, probably feels that he is at the top of the social food chain and that he will give what he wants to his employees even if he breaks California labor laws. The former employees of Assi Market were denied 10-minute break periods, were not given full eight hour workdays, and were paid \$6.75 consistently without raises. Since there is the sense that Rhee has "made it," there is no need to treat his employees as people who have lives to live and families to care for. There were also reports that it was acceptable for a Korean employee to take a cigarette break, but if a Latino employee felt like taking a cigarette break they would be insulted by the management (*LA Weekly*, May 3, 2002). The management in the market further enforced the racial hierarchy of the market by allowing the Korean employees to take cigarette breaks while discouraging Latino employees from engaging in the same activity.

Secondly, there is a possible positive outcome for race relations in Koreatown because of the Assi Market campaign. The possibility of bridges and connections formed between Korean and Latino communities will help to erase the racial hierarchy of Koreatown. This can be seen in the websites that endorse the cause of the market workers such as www.kiwa.org. The Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates have created a website that is trilingual in order to be accessible to all immigrants who are affected by the market events in Koreatown. With the relationship that has formed between the Latino and Korean communities, the fear or mistrust of the “other” will eventually disappear and the two communities will be able to work together for workers’ rights in Koreatown.

After answering the question, I began to think about the possible ways of how students like me can help improve race relations in Koreatown. I feel that students at UCLA should use the tradition, history, and respect that UCLA have in the community to draw attention to the problems of the Assi Market workers. UCLA is an institution with many professors who have ties with community organizations and leaders. Relationships like these should be exploited for the benefit of race relations in Koreatown and for the cause of the market workers. Some students and faculty at UCLA might feel that the lives of the market workers are insignificant and will have no effect on their everyday lives at UCLA, but they are mistaken. Society can only be made better from the bottom up. By easing racial tensions in Koreatown, a better quality of life can be expected for everyone, and with that comes a more harmonious society. And I might be getting ahead of myself, but with a harmonious society comes less of a need for people to commit crimes and for the government to build jails. The issue of race relations at any level is everyone’s

business. It is with the power and respect that UCLA has that changes in the local community can be achieved.