

Students as Teachers in the Community

By Jacqueline Pon

I have never really given much thought to the possibility that teaching and learning go hand in hand until Tony Osumi came to our class to lead a workshop on ways to involve others in the Assi Market workers campaign. When he gave the little anecdote about his pins and letting others make their own pins in their own creative ways, I realized that by teaching others about this expression of art, Tony was also able to further his own education in art and expression by observing other people's creations. This was further illustrated for me when Alison Delacruz came to give a presentation on how express ourselves through art using our bodies and written word. It felt good when she told us how beautiful our creations were and how she had not thought of some of the positions that we came up with in our groups. Alison, like Tony, is a teacher of activism, art, and expression, but both are also students of the people who they are instructing.

The importance of Asian American Studies as a part of society can be seen in social struggles such as the current struggle of the Assi market workers. The knowledge of the history of marginalized minority groups in America can help lay the groundwork to solving our community's current issues. There is a symbiotic relationship between the immigrant workers experiencing the hardship of the struggle and the students who bring information about the struggle to the attention of the community. While there are many valuable lessons that students at UCLA can learn from the lives of the immigrant workers, the students also have vital information for the immigrant workers.

One of the most critical roles that students can play in a struggling labor campaign is to boost or continue positive morale for the people who might feel tired and disgruntled from the lack of advancements for the campaign. It really helps that every year there is a new batch of students who are reading and willing to put so much of their time and energy into seeing the end of the labor struggle. Fresh faces on the campaign can give immigrant workers more opportunities to explain their problems to others and to refine their goals and needs.

Students also play the part of “teacher” when past struggles in history are illuminated to highlight the similarities and possibilities of the current struggle. This is where the classroom/textbook education of the students comes into play. There are several ways that this information can get out to the immigrant workers. One idea is to create multilingual fliers or pamphlets that relate historical movements to the current campaign and to pass these out to the workers on strike to not only increase their morale, but to also give them the knowledge that they are a part of history.

The knowledge of current policies and laws are also important for the immigrant workers to be aware of, so this is another aspect that students can get involved in to teach the immigrant workers about the global community that they live in today. Speakers from the community such as union leaders and professors from institutions such as UCLA can explain the relationship between the current events of the world and the labor struggles that are being experienced within a community and the relationship that the two have. Spreading information like this can be difficult because the immigrant workers still have family responsibilities and are trying to survive with low wages in a county that has a high standard of living. Forums and panels of community leaders and professors need to be brought into the communities where the immigrant workers are. They also have to come at a time that is convenient for the workers. Meetings and discussions need to happen during lunch breaks, if the workers get them, in the early morning, or in the late evening if maximum attendance is expected.

While students are trying to organize and teach the immigrant workers about the role that both plays in history, the students will, at the same time, gain worthy life experiences and knowledge from the lives and stories of the immigrant workers.