

Workers Rights at Assi Market

By David Nguyen

On Monday, February 7, at around five in the evening, two representatives of KIWA (Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates) met a few students above Assi Market to discuss the current situation facing immigrant workers in Assi Market. We taped two flyers onto the windshield of our cars in support of the workers at Assi Market. In a very cozy coffee house setting, the two representatives of KIWA related how Assi Market still pays its immigrant workers “working poor wages” despite the fact that Assi Market brings in revenues along the lines of a Ralphs or an Albertsons. In addition, they related how the working conditions are still hazardous. Many workers are overworked or are doing high risk jobs that require more safety training. Although Assi Market relented on providing health care, it seems that the appeasement was more of a façade than anything else. The former workers related how when his colleague injured his back, the owner Daniel Rhee reluctantly allowed for that worker to be taken to the hospital for treatment. Furthermore, one of the main surprises from this conversation was that talks with Assi Market concerning Assi’s acknowledgement of the Immigrant Workers Union was put in the back-burners. Instead they (KIWA and those opposing Assi) felt that they should try to concentrate more on obtaining better health coverage, better wages and reinstating wrongfully fired workers. In general, one of the main issues facing immigrant workers in Koreatown is that as immigrants they face exploitation because they do not speak or understand English and thus will not know their rights and cannot speak up for themselves, such as the hazards of their work. Another problem hampering immigrant workers is the fear of deportation (some are undocumented) if they try to organize and improve conditions. Also, in Koreatown, Latinos have a greater population than Koreans. So what’s great about what KIWA is doing is that they are trying to unite the Latinos and Korean workers in Assi Market. Unfortunately, there have been tremendous attempts by the owner of Assi Market to single out Koreans workers who support KIWA and in a way divide and conquer Koreans and Latino workers in the Market. Sadly though, the tactic seems to be working but there are a few Korean workers who stand strong with their Latino brethren in this struggle.

For me, to hold that little discussion in a coffee shop was very effective. The coffee shop scenery allowed for a more relaxed and personal dialog that seemed to speak of a meeting to share views and to give voice to the voiceless and invisible. I did not take the discussion to be pedantic in any sort of way. It seemed casual and open to questions. Furthermore, the use of coffee to stimulate taste and smelling senses was effective for me or even older adults because there seems to be the image that coffee houses are places where people come to conversate and relax. Overall, learning and teaching does not have to be in a typical classroom setting where the professor stands in front of the class to lecture the students. Learning and teaching are not mutually exclusive but are connected. If used correctly, there is a balance of give and take in that those who are teaching also learn in the process and vice versa. Therefore, one of the main differences that I saw in this event and a typical classroom is that this event took place outside of a teaching

institution. There seemed to be a greater willingness to talk about and understand the issues that the immigrant workers at Assi Market are facing. That is not to say that for example at UCLA, students are not willing to learn about a certain issue, but at these teaching institutions there is always the specter of being graded by the professor at the end of the day which was not the case at this coffee house discussion. Funny that I say this while I am writing this report. However, I did find that both, coffee house discussion and a typical classroom, try to incorporate a discussion like atmosphere so that anyone who has questions or clarifications of certain topics can do so.

For this event, in addition to attending the coffee house discussion, we were asked to tape flyers to our car windows to show support for the Assi Market workers. Another new activity was directly talking with the former Assi Market workers. I picketed in front of Assi Market before but I have never gotten a chance to talk to the former Assi Market workers. Therefore, the experience seemed to be more ingrained and held more meaning for me.

Before this event I went to the KIWA website to understand more about the market struggle against Assi Market. I read about the history of the struggle against Assi Market, the enormity of Assi Market as a supermarket, and the workers who were unfairly fired because they were known to be pro-union. I also read the accounts of some of the former Assi Market workers to get a sense of what they and their families are going through. Then I “Googled” immigrant workers rights and came up with some informing articles:

http://www.thestrategycenter.org/AhoraNow/body_koreatown_resturant_workers1.html

http://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/usa0105/1.htm#_Toc88546711

<http://www.pbs.org/itvs/thecity/immigration3.html>

<http://www.labornotes.org/archives/2003/10/c.html>

The Strategy Center and Labornotes website gave specific details about the goals of KIWA and their future strategies concerning immigrant workers rights and the exploitative practices of Assi Market. On the other hand the PBS and Human Rights Watch website gave more general outlines of immigrant workers rights and its historical context. What I found most interesting in the Human Rights Watch article is that, although obvious when I think about it, is that immigrant workers in general are easily exploited. So that is why it is so necessary to protect their rights.

In the future, I might do the literature and website search concerning KIWA and the immigrant workers at Assi Market, but I would also supplement those with a more extensive understanding of the prevalence of exploitation of immigrant workers in other industries. I would try to understand how the U.S. government plays a role in this exploitation and ways that it may or may not try to curb such practices or ways in which it might look the other way. In addition, I would try to put the issue into a global context so that in the future this Assi Market struggle can be part of a larger movement of immigrant workers rights and maybe would gain more recognition. An interesting research project to do before future community events is to maybe ask how community leaders and residents think about the issue that the event is bringing forward. Then an

invitation to these community leaders and residents to participate in the discussion might allow for a more informed community.

One of the things that I learned from this community event is that college student involvement in such a cause is quite important and necessary. Without such student involvement and KIWA help, it would seem difficult for these workers to drop their work and strike/picket. These immigrant workers have families to feed and shelter and thus would find it unfeasible to quit their job. From this student involvement I thought that asking some of these students to lead a discussion concerning the exploitive practices of Assi would be effective because these students are acting as examples for some of these other students. Maybe in the future, the students who participated in the discussion will find inspiration in what the leader of that discussion is doing and participate in the effort themselves. Another point is that to have students lead the discussion, it will break through the idea of having someone of seniority (no offense Professor Omatsu) talk about an issue. The idea is that the person has credentials because he has participated in the struggle and hopefully this can dispel the myth of learning only through books and show the necessity to initiate and seize knowledge.

In addition, Asian American studies can be learned in relation to other ethnic studies. One can see this, nowadays, in how the racial profiling of Middle Easterner and even South Asian U.S. citizens are reminiscent of what happened to Japanese Americans during World War II. It seems that Asian American Studies, Chicano Studies and even African American Studies are all separate in their own island in UCLA and maybe other colleges and universities. However, the histories, struggles and issues of each of these minorities are intertwined and quite similar in the racism and exploitation that they have faced. From talking to the two Latino former employees of Assi Market, I noticed that their struggle is the struggle of other Korean immigrant workers at Assi Market. There is much to be learned from other races in how they have dealt with racism and exploitation. Therefore, it might be best to supplement the learning of Asian American studies in the context of other ethnic studies and to keep an open mind when studying and understanding other ethnic studies. So, it is important to improve race relations and form stronger ties with other minorities because there is power in numbers.