



*Wing Lam
New York City*

WING LAM

Wing Lam, forty-two, is executive director of the Chinese Staff and Workers Association in New York City, a nonprofit grassroots labor organization that acts as an alternative to traditional unions. Founded in 1979, the association stands up for Chinese-speaking immigrant workers from various fields, successfully fighting for back wages, improved benefits, and better job conditions. In 1988, it helped one group of restaurant workers win an eight-year legal battle for \$760,000 in back pay, the largest award ever for Chinese workers in the nation.

IN 1966, I CAME TO THE UNITED STATES, HOPING TO GET AN education. I found that on the streets I got a much better education than in school. In Chicago, I worked as a waiter. I've also worked in the garment industry and as a meat cutter.

When I worked in the garment industry, we found out we were being underpaid, so we went to the union hall screaming and yelling. The union promised to straighten it out, but the next day, when the rep went to the shop, the boss fired all of the

leaders. I was a union organizer for the ILGWU for about three years, and I got fired twice. I was working in shops in which the union leader and the boss were friends and worked together in denying the workers their wages. Traditional labor unions often think that the contract is everything. They don't try to go beyond that, to help get better wages and to improve the quality of the workers' lives.

We offer a labor-rights and training program and a women's committee. We also have a legal clinic, English classes, discussion groups, workshops, and recreational and cultural activities. For the first time, we are organizing the workers in a Japanese restaurant. We are also working with other groups, black and Hispanic, to get jobs for people of color in the construction industry, which has been historically closed off to us.

At the association, workers come together from all different trades. They realize they have more in common than just working in the same kind of factory. They become a community of workers. And when all the workers come together, the bosses will have to listen.

For more information, contact: Center for Immigrant Rights at (212) 505-6890.