

Living Conditions for Chinese immigrant workers in New York

According to the 2000 Census, Chinese immigrants make up one of the largest and fastest growing populations, rising 51% over the last decade to an estimated 424,774. The vast majority of these immigrants are low-income, living or working in New York's Chinatowns. Fifty percent of the residents never finish high school; almost 40% percent do not speak English very well or at all; and, 30% of the area's families officially live below the federal poverty line. These numbers climb even more when we factor in the vast number of uncounted, undocumented immigrants who live and work in our community.

In the last decade, Chinese immigrants have been coming to the U.S., lured by images of wealth and opportunity promoted abroad. Many immigrants from China come to this country as indentured servants, owing \$30,000 - \$60,000 to snakeheads (smugglers.) Instead of the promised wealth and opportunity, when they arrive they encounter a horrifying reality: a sweatshop system. They are immediately channeled in Chinatown's unregulated trades, such as garment, restaurant and construction. Under this unregulated system, they are routinely forced to work 70-100 hours a week or more, without receiving benefits, over-time pay or even minimum wage.

For the majority of workers who are permanent legal residents or naturalized citizens, the conditions are not much better. In most Chinese families, the woman works in a garment factory while the man works in a restaurant. Lacking a formal education and facing language barriers and discrimination, Chinese immigrants find themselves struggling to survive under dismal poverty at the very edge of the economic margins.

Underneath the myth of the "model minority" and Chinatown's bustling façade, tens of thousands of workers are locked into a modern-day system of slavery, where workers are routinely stripped of their rights, abused and cheated out of their pay. A typical waiter works more than 70 hours a week for just \$75-\$100 a week. In direct violation of state and federal labor laws, the management of many Chinatown restaurants steals a portion of the tips meant for workers. Most restaurants do not pay minimum wage, let alone overtime pay, and offer no benefits such as job security, medical and sick leave.

Conditions are even more miserable for women. More than 20,000 Chinese immigrant women toil day and night in Manhattan and Sunset Park garment factories. Stuningly, the majority of Manhattan factories are already unionized. Nevertheless, these workers suffer under illegal and inhuman conditions. Neither labor laws nor union contracts are enforced in these shops. Seamstresses working by the piece rate are lucky to make \$2 - \$4 an hour. Increasingly, working 70-100 hours (or more) a week is the norm.

The lack of government accountability, the weakness of existing laws and enforcement efforts and the destructive effects of anti-worker legislation such as the Employers' Sanctions Provision¹ help to cultivate a slave-labor system in which Chinese immigrants are forced to work. Under this oppressive system, unethical employers use their involvement with organized crime and influence over police and media to silence

¹ Provision of 1986 Immigration and Control Act that allows employers the right to check workers' documents. This gives employers another weapon with which to abuse undocumented workers and to pit them against documented workers, driving down everyone's wages.

dissent and undermine organizing efforts by threatening organizers and workers with blacklisting, deportation, physical violence and death.

Since September 11th conditions have deteriorated even further. Dust, asbestos and lead settled into the tenements where Chinese workers live and work, creating an epidemic of respiratory disorders and other health problems. Over 10,000 women lost their jobs when garment trucks could not get into the area to deliver or pick up finished garments. Those who continued to work had to take severe cuts in their already sub-minimum wages. The federal government set up a makeshift disaster assistance program that mainly served wealthy neighborhoods such as Tribeca and Battery Park, while thousands who work or live in Chinatown were even denied entry into disaster assistance centers.

While September 11th has taken a tremendous economic toll on our community, the anti-immigrant and conservative political landscape fostered by government and media poses a great challenge to our organizing work. For months, Chinatown was a war zone with police check points everywhere. Workers without identification were unable to enter the area, even if they lived or worked there. Undocumented workers lived a constant state of fear. Other workers felt that they had no choice but to accept intensified workplace abuse from their employers including withholding of wages, pay-cuts, and racism.