

Why an Independent Union?

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The following letter was printed in the Dec. 5, 1988 issue of the weekly magazine The Nation.

In their letter (Oct. 10) addressing the article "How the Other Half Lives Now," by Peter Kwong and JoAnn Lum (June 18), Randy Wei, Alice Ip and May Ying Chen turned history on its head when they accused the independent unions of Chinese restaurant workers of being "divisive" and "out of touch with reality." The independent movement developed outside the AFL-CIO in response to the insensitivity of its union to the plight of Chinese restaurant workers, most of whom are working sixty hours a week at below minimum wages and without any medical benefits or job security. Ninety-nine per cent of the Chinese restaurants in the city remain unorganized today. The fact that unions like the independent 318 Restaurant Workers Union are needed is an indictment of the mainstream unions for their neglect of these workers.

The Chinese Staff and Workers Association has always supported the independent unions in the Chinese restaurant industry, not as a substitute for AFL-CIO union as Wei & Co. imply but as a vehicle to promote the participation and the organization of workers at the grassroots and rank-and-file level. Independent unions can play a crucial role when traditional unions fail and are important tools in building a strong workers' movement.

To say that the independent unions and their supporters are "aiming their fire at the International Ladies Garment Workers Union" is a vicious concoction. In fact, the CSWA was one of a handful of Chinese organizations that openly supported Local 23-25 of the ILGWU in its contract struggle in 1982. While the bosses portrayed the issue as one between the Chinese community and invading "foreign" unions, CSWA was the only voice in Chinatown that pointed out unequivocally that it was a matter of Chinese employers exploiting their own kind.

On the other hand, we believe that in no way should the workers' movement be straight-jacketed by the AFL-CIO unions. And for these unions (any union, for that matter) we would not hesitate to criticize when criticism is due. Wei & Co. erred when they equated criticism with the rejection of unions. A union can become strong through constant vigilance and organization on the part of its members.

Both Wei and Chen worked for Local 100 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union before moving on to the ILGWU (presumably for greener turf). First they stand on the sideline in Local 11 when Chinese restaurant workers are fighting on their own. Now they turn around and insult the workers for their good efforts. Can they please tell us which side they are on?

The issue of workers' initiatives and participation is an important one for the labor movement. This question and its relation specifically to Chinese restaurant workers and independent unions cannot be fully addressed in this letter. More coverage of this issue is clearly called for.

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