

# CSWA NEWS: The Voice of Chinese American Workers

Winter 1990

Chinese Staff and Workers Association

Vol.2, Issue 1

## CPC's growing labor woes; Workers call for fundraiser boycott

The battle against the anti-labor, anti-union policies of the Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC) is not yet over. Once again in this holiday season, fired CPC construction workers are appealing to the public to boycott CPC's fundraising activities and its traditional Chinese New Year banquets.

"Before we give the CPC another penny, city officials and the public must demand that the CPC cease harassing and firing workers engaged in legitimate organizing activities," said Lee Young Shi, a twice-fired CPC worker and leader of the CPC Construction Workers Union.

Workers and their supporters are also asking the CPC to open its books and give a full accounting for the amount of public money the CPC misspent on union-busting in staff time and legal fees.

### CPC squanders public funds

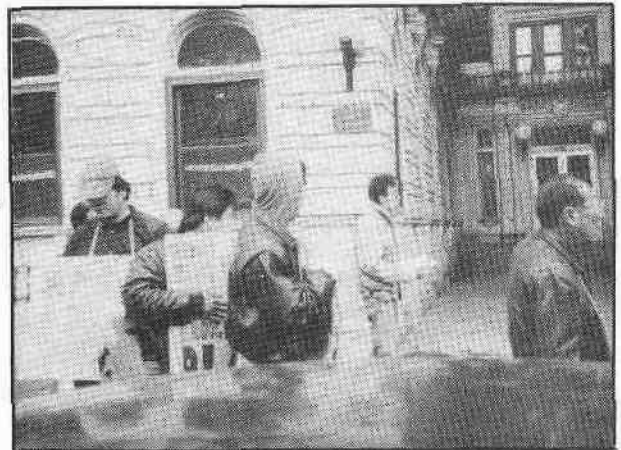
"In an economic recession and budget crisis, it's unconscionable for the CPC to squander precious public money on drawn-out legal maneuvers against its workers," Wing Lam, CSWA's executive director, said. "Bear in mind that 95% of the CPC's annual \$20 million budget is taxpayers' money.

"We must stop them from dipping into our pockets to pay for their attacks on working people, the very people they are supposed to serve," Lam added.

During the past year, new unfair labor practice charges were made against the CPC, as pending cases slowly wound through the legal process.

- The 30 CPC construction workers fired on New Year's Eve, 1988, are still fighting for reinstatement and back pay. In a four-day hearing at the National Labor Relations Board held this November, three CPC workers from the Intercity Remodeling and Apartment Repair (IRAR) program testified that they were harassed and finally fired for their union activities. The NLRB, which issued a complaint charging CPC with wrongful dismissal and harassment of the workers, is prosecuting the case.
- Maintenance workers at Hong Ning Housing, a CPC senior housing project, organized a union in October, 1989, but their efforts for recognition have been stonewalled by management. The NLRB is expected to rule soon on the workers' right to unionize and bargain collectively.
- Workers at the CPC's Phoenix Food catering program have also organized a union. The CPC is attempting to deny a group of "Senior Aides," workers over the age of 55, the right to join the union (see page 2).
- Phoenix manager Albert Lau punched and kicked a Phoenix worker on November 5, 1990. This physical assault follows months of verbal abuse by Lau against the workers who signed up with the

union. While CPC's senior management condoned Lau's assault by their silence, the NLRB is investigating the



CPC workers picket home of CPC Board Chairman Henry Tang in October 1990

incident. Criminal assault charges have also been filed.

- This November, Shao Chen, a Hong Ning maintenance worker, filed charges at the NYC Human Rights Commission charging the CPC with age discrimination. Chen, 58, is paid \$200 per week for the same work for which his co-workers are earning \$365 per week.
  - On another front, Intercity Remodeling and Apartment Repair (IRAR) workers filed a multi-million dollar lawsuit against New York City and the CPC charging violations of the prevailing wage laws (see article page 2).
- Meanwhile, CPC workers and their supporters are getting ready to brave the winter cold and picket the CPC's fundraising events. "With the pickets and the boycott, we want to send a clear message to the CPC: We will never give up fighting for decent working conditions and our right to organize. Treat your workers as human beings — now," Lam said.

## Chinese New Year Celebration Sunday, February 24, 1991 11 AM-3 PM

Food, raffles, lion dance, kung fu demonstration,  
CSWA chorus and much, much more!  
All our friends are invited.

P.S. 124, 40 Division St., Chinatown

# CSWA

## Immigrant workers sue city

by Dena Bunis

Charging that they worked for less than half the wages required by federal law, a group of 35 Asian-American construction workers has filed a federal lawsuit against the agency that hired them, as well as the city of New York.

Kei Man Li, a 31-year-old immigrant from Hong Kong, said that for 15 months he painted, dumped garbage, did plasterboard work and other carpentry chores in city-owned buildings being renovated for the poor and homeless.

For that work he was paid about \$5 an hour. He received no benefits. Union painters in New York earn more than \$12 an hour plus benefits for apprentices to more than \$27 for a fully trained worker.

"They worked on houses they are not able to afford to live in," said Wing Lam, a labor rights activist who or-

ganized the workers into filing the lawsuit. The work was done between 1986 and 1989.

The suit names the Chinese-American Planning Council Inc., a community organization that has provided social services, employment and other services to immigrants for 25 years. Until the end of last year, the agency was under contract to the city to provide the renovation work. Also being sued is the city Department of Housing Preservation and Development, which awarded the contract to the planning council and paid the group with federal Community Development funds.

Lam said he and other activists unsuccessfully attempted to get Mayor David N. Dinkins, then Manhattan borough president, involved in settling the issue. The group's lawyer, Ellen Dichner, wrote Dinkins again in June, asking that the city compensate the workers. They said they received no reply. The lawsuit

was filed Aug. 31.

A spokeswoman for the mayor said yesterday she could not comment on the suit.

At issue is whether the community organization should have paid prevailing wages to the immigrant workers or whether the agency was running a training program and thereby was exempt from such federal regulations.

Irv Miljoner, a federal Labor Department official who heads up enforcement of the federal prevailing-wage law for the New York/New Jersey region, said his office reported "substantial findings" of wrongdoing in how workers were paid.

"Our finding was that they were employees," Miljoner said, as opposed to trainees.

David Chen, managing director of the Chinese-American Planning Coun-

*Continued on page 6*

## CPC won't bargain ... again!

The CPC is trying to deny the right of senior workers at its Phoenix Food Catering program to form a union and bargain collectively, claiming that they are not covered by the National Labor Relations Act. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) is examining the case.

These senior workers, who helped form the Hong Ning Workers Union this past summer, receive the minimum wage of \$3.80/hour for about 20 hours work per week. Their jobs are funded through a grant from the U.S. Labor Department's Senior Citizen Community Service Employment Program.

The CPC asserts that these so-called "Senior Aides" are not really workers, but "people being prepared for the world of work." But the senior Phoenix workers have been performing a necessary function (e.g., preparing food in a kitchen which serves several hundred people every day), identical to that of other workers on the same job over a

prolonged period. Some of these seniors have been on the job for **over five years** at the minimum wage. "The CPC is deliberately using us as cheap labor," said one of the workers.

Representing the Hong Ning workers, CSWA staff attorney Jackson Chin said, "A favorable decision in our case will set a national precedent. The ruling will ensure that similarly situated senior workers will not be treated as second class employees with inferior rights."

### Labor Dept. funds used

The U.S. Labor Dept. currently funds over 65,000 senior aide jobs nationwide under a \$367 million program. Over 10,000 of these jobs are sponsored by the National Council of Senior Citizens (NSCC) through local groups such as the CPC. To be included in the program, people have to be 55 or older and have an income below 125% of the federal poverty level (annual total in-

come, including Social Security, less than \$7,850 for singles and \$10,525 for couples.)

The NSCC, with strong links to the AFL-CIO, has joined the CPC in opposing the right of the Senior Aides to unionize. The NSCC's general counsel, Robert J. Mozer, appeared on behalf of the CPC at a recent NLRB hearing.

CSWA is soliciting support for the Phoenix workers and has begun a broad campaign to ensure the right of all senior workers to bargain collectively. Supporters should write to Lawrence T. Smedley, Executive Director, National Senior Citizens Council (925 15th St. N.W., Washington, DC 20005) and ask the NSCC to stop challenging the right of senior workers to bargain for wages and benefits.

### CSWA office hours:

Monday — Friday: 11 AM–7 PM  
Sunday: 10 AM–5 PM  
15 Catherine St., 2nd floor rear  
Telephone: (212) 619-7979

# CSWA

## Profile

### Edward Dun, a veteran fighter

Edward Dun is a founding member of CSWA; he has been president of the organization for three separate terms. He has been active in Chinese restaurant workers' struggles since 1980.

Edward recalled that in 1980, he was working at Uncle Tai's at 63rd Street and Third Ave., when the workers there approached Local 69 (which later merged into Local 100) of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union about organizing the restaurant. After a brief walkout, the workers there became the first Chinese restaurant workers to get a union contract.

After their success at Uncle Tai's, Local 69 organized other Chinese restaurants, including David K's.

The workers realized that there were many unfair conditions. They did not have medical benefits, they did not have vacations, they were fined, and they could be fired or laid off at any



time. That was why they fought to bring in a union.

Eventually, however, workers in Local 100 became dissatisfied. The local was run from the top down and did not listen to its members. Edward and other restaurant and garment workers started holding meetings which led to the formation of the Chinese Staff and Workers Association.

Edward participated in the organizing efforts of the 318 Restaurant

Workers Union, which came out of CSWA. Today, he and other members of CSWA are always willing to join a picket line when called upon by any of the independent unions that work in conjunction with CSWA.

Edward became a resident of the United States when he jumped ship in 1950. "When I got here, I loved this country," he says. Two years later he was drafted into the Army and served in Japan during the Korean War. As a result of his military service, he became a citizen in 1954. Today, he's a member of the Auxiliary Police.

Edward thinks that CSWA has fulfilled an important role in the Chinese community. It is always there to help workers when called upon and provides information and organizing assistance to Chinese workers who have nowhere else to turn.

"The CSWA has done a very good job," Edward says. "All of us are very grateful. It's become a worker's family for all of us."

## CSWA activities

### Immigrant rights clinic

Wednesday, 3-7 PM

Special clinics on weekends

Co-sponsored by the Center for Immigrant Rights

### Labor rights clinic

Wednesday and Friday, 2-5 PM

Issues: Unemployment, workers compensation, unfair firing and unionization, wage and hour law violations.

### Labor education

Session 1: "The Economic Crisis in New York City"

Sunday, January 20, 1-3 PM

Speaker: Bob Fitch, economist & writer

Session 2: "Why American Workers' Wages Are Falling"

Sunday, February 17, 1-3 PM

### English classes

15-session semester starts on Sunday, January 7, 1991

### Letter writing by Women's Committee

Members of the Women's Committee read, write and translate letters for those who cannot read or write either English or Chinese.

The Women's Committee are mostly restaurant, garment, home care and clerical workers.

### Immigrant Youth Tutorial

Monday and Wednesday, 4-6 PM

Two interns tutor children of recent immigrants. Students receive individual tutoring. They practice using English in a variety of settings: discussions, games and music.

New students can enroll for the January-February term by contacting Peter Lin, (212) 619-7979.

## CSWA notes

To our many friends in various walks of life, we are grateful for your ongoing support. Let's mobilize for a better New York in 1991.

This newsletter and programs of the CSWA are made possible by membership dues, individual contributions and grants from various foundations. We would also like to acknowledge the countless hours of volunteer service generously donated by members and friends of CSWA.

The Chinese Staff and Workers Association (CSWA) is a non-profit workers mutual-aid and educational organization that seeks to promote self-help and organization among Chinese workers.

**Executive Director:** Wing Lam  
**Education Director:** Jackson Chin  
**Women's Program:** Wendy Lau  
**Office Assistant:** Yue Ying Choi

# CSWA

## El Paso women demand garment industry reform

When a garment shop in El Paso, Texas shut down, the Mexican immigrant women working there were owed several weeks pay. The women took matters into their own hands. Instead of only filing charges with the Department of Labor the workers chained themselves to sewing machines. The police were called, and the workers were arrested. But pictures of them chained to the sewing machines appeared in the El Paso media.

This action allowed the women and the workers organization to which they belong, *La Mujer Obrera* (The Woman Worker), to dramatize a U.S. Labor

Department finding that a total of \$85,000 in back wages was owed to over 1,000 garment workers in El Paso. *La Mujer Obrera* contends that this is only the tip of the iceberg. Many shops make a regular practice of declaring "bankruptcy" without paying workers, then opening up again under a different name a few weeks later.

In succeeding weeks *La Mujer Obrera* found other ways to publicize the plight of El Paso's garment workers. Just before Labor Day, workers went on a hunger strike to press their demand that all garment workers receive the money owed them and to urge the local, state and national government to pass laws which would end these scandalous conditions.

The workers want all garment shops to be registered by the state of Texas; they want federal laws making the manufacturer of garments, not just the sub-contractor, responsible for wages; they want not paying wages to be a criminal offense; and they want shops employing more than 75 people to post a bond guaranteeing wages.

Cecilia Rodrigues, director of *La Mujer Obrera*, stressed the need for reform. She said, "We're not saying government agencies haven't tried [to collect back wages]. They have. But at the same time, there are factory owners laughing at the authorities because current laws just won't make them pay."

The workers also urged the city of El Paso to establish an office to coordinate the enforcement of state, city and federal legislation concerning

workplace conditions and labor standards in the garment industry. They asked for a Congressional hearing on the lack of protection for minority immigrant women workers in the country.

These and other demands attracted widespread public attention and favorable comment in the media and by elected officials. One of the hunger strikers, Maria Garcia, a worker owed

CSWA and *La Mujer Obrera* are both immigrant workers' organizations and organize along similar lines.

When people said that immigrants could not be organized, CSWA assisted Chinese restaurant workers in forming an independent union. When people said that the union is the only form of organization possible for workers, we brought workers together in a workers' center, where workers cooperate across trade lines.

When people said that the construction industry could not be touched, we helped form the CPC Workers Union, an independent construction union, then went on to campaign for city-community hiring halls and construction training programs. The workers in the independent union not only fought for themselves, but challenged the apartheid system in the construction industry.

The majority of immigrant garment workers in New York are paid below the minimum wage. Can we empower these workers and change the terrible conditions which exist in garment shops in New York City?



Hunger strike in El Paso

two month's wages by a garment factory, told the *El Paso Times* that unless she was paid, she could lose her house. She said, "I have a daughter in school who depends on me and without the money, I can't do anything for her."

The *Times* said in an editorial: "If, indeed, this is a widespread problem it is disgraceful and justifies tough action by the federal government against the companies and their owners ...

"The very least the City Council should do is actively support legislation setting criminal penalties for withholding workers wages."

By using unconventional methods, *La Mujer Obrera* strengthened their economic demands, exposed long-standing abuses in an important industry in El Paso, and pushed for a program to change these conditions.

## Employer sanctions creating scabs

The employer sanction provisions of the 1986 immigration act have been in force for the last three years. In our community employers use employer sanction as a tool to divide workers.

Most Chinese immigrant workers are employed in marginal industries, such as restaurants and the garment industry, where few skills are needed beyond the ability to work long and hard. When workers look for jobs, bosses now demand to see their identification papers. If workers have papers, many bosses will say there is no work available. However, if a worker cannot produce documentation, the boss says he will do him a favor and hire him. But since the boss is doing the worker such a big favor, he won't mind if he's paid less — say, 20-30% less.

Workers without documentation are at a disadvantage. They have to take any job they are offered at whatever pay they can get. Even when they know that the boss is taking advantage of them and discriminating against them by paying them less than other workers, they have to accept those conditions.

### Workers afraid to organize

Workers in such a situation are afraid to organize to improve their condition. If they join a union or protest against working conditions, the boss can suggest that the immigration service will pay them a visit. Even if they are short-changed on their pay, even if the boss doesn't pay them for weeks at a time, they are afraid to protest.

In marginal industries, many bosses under-report payroll taxes. With the employer sanction provisions in effect, this practice is growing and has created a huge underground economy in our community. With the underground economy growing, bosses have brought down wages across the board by an estimated 20-30%, especially in the garment industry.

Employer sanctions have destroyed one of the good traditions in our community: that of never asking to see anyone's papers. Undocumented workers actually find it easier to find

work than those with papers, but everyone's wages are driven down. Once a boss has a number of undocumented workers on his premises, he can tell other workers that he doesn't see why he should pay them more.

### ILGWU changes position

When the immigration act was passed, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), whose members are mainly immigrants, favored employer sanctions. They clung to this position for several years, despite mounting evidence that it was harming their own members.

CSWA, the Asian American Legal Defense Fund, the Center for Immigrant Rights and the Lower East Side Catholic Area Conference launched a campaign in the Chinese American community to alert people to the dangers of employer sanctions. We encouraged articles in the Chinese

Employer sanctions have created an army of workers who are forced to work for whatever is necessary to keep bread on the table and a roof over their heads. There is no one they can turn to for relief — the unions scorn them, the government will send them back to even worse conditions in their native country unless they post several thousand dollars bail.

### Sanctions hurt all workers

Employer sanctions have broader ramifications. They not only hurt immigrant workers but affect all workers. Once employers are able to drive down the wage level of any worker who might be suspected of being undocumented, all immigrant workers are willing to work cheaper than they did before. They will take any job available at whatever wage is offered. This large pool of labor reduces the wages of the native born, and will continue to do so as long as these workers remain unorganized and have no rights..

The leadership of the AFL-CIO, in the name of representing native-born workers, supports employer sanctions. By pursuing this short-sighted policy the AFL-CIO promotes the very thing they fear — a large pool of cheap labor

press clarifying the problems with employer sanctions, petitioned to repeal these provisions, handed out Chinese language brochures explaining why employer sanctions hurt our community, and alerted people attending the Chinatown Labor Fair of the dangers. Pressure on the ILGWU, from its own members and the immigrant rights community, forced it to reconsider its position. Finally, early this year the union realized that it had been mistaken and took a position advocating repeal of employer sanctions. We sincerely hope that the ILGWU will use its considerable influence to see to that employer sanctions are, in fact, repealed.

that divides worker from worker and drives down wages and benefits.

We call people scabs when they cross a picket line, breaking solidarity and dividing workers. But solidarity must be present in our hearts and minds before it can exist on a picket line. When the leaders of the AFL-CIO endorse laws which divide immigrant workers from other workers they break solidarity and divide workers. When they do this, they are scabs themselves.

### INTERNSHIPS WITH CSWA Applications Now Open

Get school credit for learning the fine art of grassroots organizing. CSWA is looking for mature high school and college students who want to volunteer time for community work. Can work on individual projects. Summer and school year positions open. Chinese/English bilingual and/or community commitment preferred. Call for application: (212) 619-7979.

## Bring the troops home!

by Peter Lin

As the Middle East crisis plunges into its fourth month, what can we expect in the coming months? First, Saddam Hussein must be condemned for Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. However, both the government and the media are escalating their rhetoric and that may lead to more than bad language being exchanged in the Mideast.

The US government wants us to believe that Saddam became a madman, terrorist and ruthless dictator the moment the Iraqi troops crossed into Kuwait. This name-calling now is strange. Two years ago, Hussein used poison gas against Iraq's own ethnic minority, the Kurds. Why didn't the US government criticize Hussein then?

Early in the crisis, the media's theme was "negotiated settlement." After four months, articles and programs question when the US troops should liberate the country: war now—or war later. Columnists ponder the cost of an invasion in

terms of military hardware, world opinion, and soldiers' lives.

Initially, troops were sent to Saudi Arabia to protect against an Iraqi invasion. While Hussein's troops stayed put, President Bush ordered 100,000 more troops to the Middle East, November 8, bringing the total to approximately 400,000 American soldiers. That move carries ominous rumblings of war. Three months ago the action would have been decried as military adventurism. But now it is accepted as a necessary military buildup.

### What is "naked aggression?"

President Bush says that "naked aggression" must be opposed. Yet, naked aggression was not opposed when Indonesia invaded East Timor, Turkey invaded Cyprus, and when Israel annexed the Occupied Territories. The US, the main supporter of Israel, made few objections to the violent repression and death in the Occupied Territories. Clearly, the United States has chosen

certain instances of "naked aggression" to oppose and other instances to ignore.

According to US officials the US is in Saudi Arabia to ensure our lifestyle and economy. On November 14, Secretary of State, James Baker, said that the US had a responsibility to ensure American jobs. Yet because the Mideast oil supply would be slowed to a trickle in the event of war, the American economy would decline, not take off. To engage in a bloody war to boost our economy is not only immoral — it will not work. When the US government talks about jobs it means jobs as soldiers and jobs in the military industrial complex.

As responsible citizens of the United States, we must continue to analyze the trends in the Middle East crisis. We must oppose US intervention and instead seek a United Nations resolution. We should push for US troop withdrawal if we hope for a peaceful holiday season.

*Peter Lin is an organizer/intern at CSWA working on labor and youth programs.*

### Immigrant workers from p. 2

cil, said the city paid his agency \$95 per worker per day for the contract. Out of that \$95 had to come wages for the workers, wages for the supervisors, tools and transportation for the workers.

Chen said his agency couldn't possibly have afforded wages higher than were paid.

"We lost money on the contract and ended up with all kinds of problems," Chen said when asked why the agency didn't reapply for funding for the 1990 program year.

The group bringing the lawsuit is waiting for the results of the U.S. Labor Department investigation before it calculates exactly how much money it will seek. However, Dichner said the group is confident the back pay will involve millions of dollars.

Miljoner did say that if the Washington office of the Labor Department upholds the findings in the Chinese-American Planning case, the

other agencies that operate similar programs in New York — Vera Institute, Wildcat Service Corp. and the Doe Fund Inc. — may well be targeted for a similar investigation. Those three agencies have received a total of \$12.5 million from the city for such work, covering the next 18 months.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Housing Preservation and Develop-

ment said the agency considers the program a way to help those who are hard to employ prepare for the world of work.

"We do not consider it a construction-training program," she said. She would not comment on the lawsuit or the potential wage-and-hour action.

(Reprinted from *Newsday*, September 13, 1990)

**I want to support your work to secure fair working conditions and empowerment of workers in the Chinese community.** Enclosed is my tax deductible donation. (Please make checks payable to the Chinese Staff and Workers Association and mail to: CSWA, 15 Catherine St. 2/R, New York, NY 10038.)

\$20       \$50       \$100       Other

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Send more information about your activities.

## Labor News

In the *Daily News* strike management has tried to play off minority groups against the strikers. While management charges that the craft unions at the News are largely staffed by white, male workers, the *Daily News* fought and lost a \$3.1 million lawsuit to black editorial staff who alleged that they had been discriminated against.

After the strikers cut the News' circulation from 1.1 million to around 200,000 by denying it access to newsstands, management resorted to using the homeless as street hawkers. The paper is being sold at a cut rate (25¢ instead of 35¢) and the hawkers are al-

### Boycott the Daily News

lowed to keep the all the receipts. As charity, with a functioning enterprise, this would be one thing; using people who don't have a roof over their head as strikebreakers is cynical manipulation of the unfortunate. Jesse Jackson said: "Don't use the homeless to make somebody else homeless."

The News attempted to recruit replacements for its editorial staff by soliciting employment applications from groups of black and Asian journalists. Both groups resisted the overtures, sensing the hypocrisy in the News' claim that it was attempting to establish a group of reporters more representative of the city's demographics.

\* \* \*

### Anti-scab bill

There is a bill before Congress banning the use of replacement workers during strikes. Workers in this country cannot be fired for going on strike, but management has the right to hire "permanent replacements." This means that workers will not get their jobs back when the strike ends, unless the labor force expands.

It has been hard for workers to understand the distinction between being fired because you go on strike and not getting your job back when the strike

ends because a permanent replacement has been hired. The legal situation in this country is unique among industrialized nations; only South Africa and Great Britain have similar laws.

Present statutes which permit permanent replacements put workers at a severe disadvantage during a labor dispute. They also make the dispute more bitter; once permanent replacements have been hired, both sides have to push for total victory.

In the News strike, management has whined about violence by striking workers. However, management has said that many will never get their jobs back; a few people who crossed the picket lines after the strike began were told that they had already been replaced. People who have everything to lose — and in this society a good job is just about everything — will fight fire with fire.

\* \* \*

### Who gets the pain in fiscal crisis?

In the New York City fiscal crisis, workers are facing a familiar scenario — layoffs, a wage freeze, funding the city's shortfall out of their benefit funds. The cries of rage from the members of these unions, whose support was crucial to electing David Dinkins, has prompted calls for strikes and job actions by union leaders.

Don't hold your breath. Strikes by municipal employee unions are illegal under the Taylor law and union treasuries would be hit by heavy fines.

CWA Local 1180, led by Arthur Cheliotis, is pursuing a more promising strategy. This union has come up with a fiscal plan of its own which would increase the city's revenues by \$1.8 billion and close the budget gap. They want to tax those who can most afford it — real estate speculators, Wall Street wizards, big business — and have them contribute their share to keep the city running.

While chances for passing the total package are slim, lobbyists for Local 1180 report interest from politicians, who realize that continually cutting services by eliminating city workers, while

people complain about the quality of life in the city, is a losing game.

\* \* \*

### Paying for health insurance

As the cost of medical insurance escalates, unions and some employers are showing greater interest in the idea of national health care. However, to date unions locally have not agreed on which of a grab bag of plans they support.

One bill before Congress, sponsored by Senator Kennedy, takes a cautious approach. Basically it provides money to subsidize health care from private insurance companies for those not covered by their employers

The Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW), advocates a policy that would replace private insurers with a publicly administered health plan. Every citizen would receive a card that would entitle them to free basic healthcare. The private healthcare delivery system would remain intact but the profit-making private insurance companies would be eliminated.

Unions have begun to realize that something must be done to reform the present system, but they have not mobilized their members in significant numbers. A rally at City Hall Park to push for national healthcare resulted in a dismal turnout, mainly from healthcare unions, and there was as much talk about contract demands as there was about national healthcare.

## Organizing the Unorganized

**318 Restaurant Workers Union**  
Representing Silver Palace and  
other restaurants

**Patronize Union Restaurants!**

15 Catherine Street  
2nd floor, rear  
New York, NY 10038  
(212) 619-8181

## Children at a sewing machine: Grim choice for immigrants

by Wendy Lau

"I can help out my family and learn something in the garment factory."

"I feel bored, staying home after school."

Chen, Wu and Yue attend Seward Park High School, where they are part of the bi-lingual program. They are all new immigrants from China; they all come from a low-income families, and all work in a garment factory.

Wu is 16, but since she is short and has a sweet smile she looks much younger. She came here six months ago. Before she even started school, she went to work in a garment factory; she had only been in the country for three or four weeks. Her 18 year old older sister works in the same factory and also attends Seward Park.

Wu works because she wants to help her family and to learn a trade. She says that she has learned how to operate a sewing machine at the factory.

Wu goes to work right after school, and stays until seven; by eight she is home; she eats, takes a bath and does her school work before going to bed at 11. She gets up the next day at 6:30.

### School or work?

If Wu was forced to choose between school and work, she says that she would choose school. She thinks she is doing reasonably well at Seward Park, since classes in the bi-lingual program proceed slowly.

Chen is 16 and has been here for 11 months. Like Wu, she works because she feels obliged to help her family. Chen works in the same factory as her mother. She works from three to seven every day, and all day Saturday and Sunday. She doesn't really know how much she makes, since the boss gives the money to her mother.

One night I called Chen on the phone. She was still doing her school-work at 10:40. Her mother was asleep. Chen says that she doesn't really like the United States because she doesn't

have many friends.

Yue is 15. She came here in September and started to work almost immediately in the same factory as her aunt. She has an older brother who works days and studies at night.

Yue works for a different reason than Chen or Wu: after school she was bored at home with only her younger brother and sister for company.

Yue works from three until six and gets home between seven and eight. All the money she earns goes to her mother; Yue asks her mother for money when she needs it.

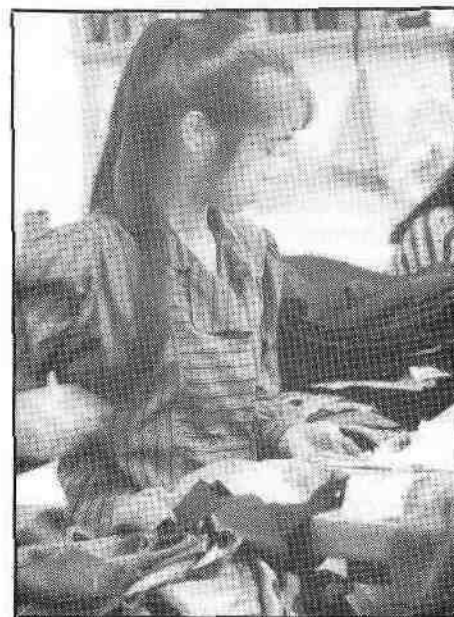
Increasingly, children of recent immigrants, particularly young girls, work in garment factories after school. Either the family needs the extra money, or the girls would prefer working in a factory with their mother to staying home alone; both parents and children rarely consider the impact of factory work on the children's education.

### Students asleep in class

A former Seward Park teacher, Alexandra Jacobus, recalled that many high school students who work in factories come to school exhausted, without having done their homework, and fall asleep in class. When a teacher becomes aware of this problem, it is difficult to reach parents on the phone to talk about it, either because the parents have difficulty in understanding English, or because the parents are usually out working themselves.

Parents who live and work in Chinatown don't realize that their children have to make an effort to learn English and adapt to American society; it is hard for them to grasp that their children need to devote extra time to their education and that working in a factory robs them of this opportunity. The parents are overwhelmed by their own lives and do not have time to reflect about their children's education.

The use of child labor reinforces the already low wage scale in the garment industry. Bosses realize that children won't object to anything they are offered, and give them lower wages as replacements for other workers.



A school-age girl working in a Chinatown garment shop

Andrea Vásquez/Amer. Social History Proj.

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