

## **Sweatshop Women Discuss Their Union Contract**

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Most garment workers in Chinatown are members of Local 23-25 of UNITE (the Union of Needle Industries and Textile Employees). In 1996 Local 23-25's contract came up for negotiation. On July 9, 1996 I talked with Ms. Wong, Ms. Ng, and Ms. Lee, three members of Local 23-25 about the new contract (all names have been changed).

When I asked the women what they thought of the new contract, they all laughed. Ms. Wong exclaimed, "even if it was a good contract, it is only a piece of paper."

It meant nothing to them that wage adjustments are lower in the new contract as compared to the old one. Whatever it says in the contract, they will get paid between \$2.00 to \$3.00 an hour, if they get paid at all. They work 70 or 80 hours a week without any overtime pay. Recently their earnings have been declining.

The women told me that their boss does not tell them the piece rate until they have finished their work. The more they finish, the lower the piece rate seems to get. The less they get paid, the more hours they feel compelled to work. As wages decline, they try to work more hours. As they work more hours, the price-value of their time falls.

I asked the women why they keep on paying union dues when Local 23-25 fails to protect them. They said they do it for the health insurance.

To qualify for the union's health program they have to make more than \$7,000 a year. Many Chinatown union members do not make this much. To qualify for union health benefits, workers have to buy checks from their employers, so that they can claim they made \$7,000.

Why haven't Ms. Wong, Ms. Ng, and Ms. Lee ever filed complaints with UNITE? They told me Local 23-25 representatives answer workers' complaints by visiting them at their factories during work hours. The union representative makes an announcement on the factory floor, asking the person who filed the complaint to identify her or himself. The union rep then sits next to the worker and asks her what kind of complaints she has against the boss. The entire conversation is carried out in front of the boss.

Ms. Ng explained, "That way, UNITE shows us they 'care' and at the same time they take care of workers who file complaints. When confronted by the representative right in front of the boss, most workers claim that they did not file a complaint at all or that it was just a misunderstanding."

Ms. Lee added, "This stops other people from getting ideas about filing a complaint, since none of us want a union representative marching into the factory, pointing us out to the boss as trouble makers. That saves the boss a lot of work."

Even though they didn't think Local 23-25 could offer them help in improving conditions, the women still want to fight for change. They said things were better ten to fifteen years ago. They remember the days when workers would get together on the factory floor—whether they were union members or not – and bargain with the boss directly for a higher piece rate. If the boss refused, the women would have their own sit-down strike. They remember when workers could say "no" to working more than 40 hours a week. Ms. Ng, Ms. Wong, and Ms. Lee feel that since workers enjoyed these rights years ago, it is possible for people to win them again.

I asked them, if UNITE is not going to fight for the interests of garment workers, who is left to do the job? They agreed that the only way is for workers to organize themselves, to fight for what they want on their own terms.

On another day, another worker, Ms. Chan, told CSWA News, “Before the big strike in 1982 we used to make much more money, and we worked shorter hours. At most, we worked between 40 to maybe 48 hours a week. Some people worked on Saturdays. No one worked on Sundays.”

On April 1, 1997, the China Press, a local Chinatown paper, ran a story about a survey that Local 23-25 conducted of its members. According to the survey, the number one areas of dissatisfaction were that people don’t want to work Sundays; they don’t like the long hours; and they aren’t receiving any overtime pay. One union member told the paper, “We don’t want to work on Sundays. We need time to take of our children.”