

**CSWA's First 20 Years**  
**Workers Fighting Sweatshops Here**  
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As CSWA marks our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and looks ahead to the new millennium, we are given the opportunity to celebrate the significant impact of our organizing work and the cumulative efforts of working people. CSWA members and other workers in our community have taken risks, developed as fighters and leaders, set inspiring examples, and spearheaded battles that lay the groundwork for future struggles.

It all started in 1979 when a group of Chinese restaurant workers met at a hamburger joint in Chinatown and discussed their desire for rights and dignity in the workplace. No one at that time imagined that this small group of immigrant workers would become a powerful community-based membership institution organizing thousands of workers of all trades – particularly garment, restaurant and construction – to fight for workers' rights in the workplace and the community.

In organizing to address the immediate problems of working people, we have succeeded in involving numerous workers and young people who have provided leadership to our organization, and in challenging the systemic problems of social and economic inequity.

Most important, we have exposed sweatshop conditions in the U.S. and propelled this issue into the national agenda. Our work has been recognized nationally; CSWA was selected by the President's Summit for America's Future as a "teaching example" for volunteer organizations – the only organization recognized for fighting sweatshops.

Our successes over the years have set precedents:

- Challenging the illegal practice of tips appropriation by restaurant managements in New York City
- Bringing about shorter work hours in restaurants and garment factories in Chinatown
- Highlighting day care as a critical issue for working women in Chinatown, forcing the government and local institutions to allocate more space for each use
- Blocking luxury-housing development by arguing that "people" are part of the environment and should not be displaced, redefining the parameters of environmental issues
- Holding the government responsible for paying federal prevailing wages to participants of a "training" program, organizing construction "trainees" in the late 1980s into an independent union to expose how government was using non-profit organizations to promote workfare
- Sending to prison employers who failed to pay their workers, and demanding the responsibility of garment manufacturers and retailers for the sweatshop conditions of their contractors
- Exposing the collusion of unscrupulous employers, tongs, police and the media in Chinatown- as well as the complicity of media such as the New York Times – challenging their bankrupt and racist view that Chinese want to be cheap labor
- Holding landowners such as New York University and Columbia responsible for the practices of their contractors, including the racist exclusion of communities of color from economic opportunities

- Identifying longer hours and related occupational-health problems as serious problems for working people – especially women—leading to the call for control over our time and our lives as a human right as a key issue for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Through these years, we have learned through struggle about the need to build a new kind of labor movement led by working people. We have developed the workers' center model to build such a movement. We want to overcome the prevailing way of thinking in this country that settles for compromised needs, for only what is winnable or "affordable." Cutting through this resignation, we are promoting the importance of working people fighting together for what is our right – for control over our time and our lives.