

Interview with Jimmy Ong
CSWA News Summer 1999 Volume 7 Issue 1

Jimmy Ong was the first general secretary of CSWA when it was founded in 1979. He has continued to be an active member of the organization. Recently Jimmy was interviewed for the 20th anniversary documentary video being created by the CSWA Video Project.

Twenty years ago, I was a waiter. At the time, our restaurant intended to fire the old waiters. We were not happy with it and organized to join a local union, which was Local 69, following [the example] of another big restaurant which was Uncle Tai's to join a union. It only took one day of a boycott and the boss promised us we could join [the union] and we signed a contract. After only ½ a year, I discovered the trade union couldn't protect us. It's a stereotype [that they can]. Everything is bureaucratic, they cannot do a real job for us. We discovered if we really want to protect our own rights, we should have something like our own organization for ourselves. We could use the power of ourselves then they [the bosses] would deal with us. At the time, we unified four restaurants and had one representative from each restaurant come to a Chinatown hamburger shop to have a meeting. All of them agreed with my point and we formed the Chinese Staff and Workers Association.

Since this association was established, we really can work on our rights by organizing all the workers. Only one year later, we had a really big case in Chinatown – the Silver Palace case. Silver Palace had about 30 waiters in the dining room who came to us saying their boss stole their tips, had low pay and worked too many hours – everything not a nice place for a laborer to have.

From the start, we concentrated only restaurant workers' rights; later we stretched out to garment workers because many garment workers came to our association, complaining that working conditions were too bad. Later, we came to construction workers.

In the 20 years, one thing is already proven – you can organize yourselves, you use that group power and you can really champion the workers. We believe that.