

Women Workers Should Stand Up
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CSWA is a home for workers, especially women workers, in our community. We not only share moments of happiness and inspiration with one another but also we come together to work towards solutions for problems that we as women workers face.

Our Women's Project is structured in a way to provide opportunities for women to meet, get to know one another, and discuss collective ways to expose, challenge or solve various problems. We need to break out of the trap set up for women, which embodies juggling different obligations including spending time with children, doing housework and making a living. In the workplace, we are discriminated against and shut out from higher paying, more stable jobs; in the factories our labor is taken advantage of when bosses trick out of our wages. Women are especially vulnerable to exploitation; many bosses think that they can control and bully women easier. We need to come together to challenge our employers and to change the institutions that have virtually enslaved us.

I have seen that many women have already been coming forward to organize and fight for their rights. A group of women dim sum workers at the New Silver Palace, who had endured hard work and sexism at the hands of their employer, is picketing four times a week to challenge their illegal firing. Their bosses tried to further humiliate them after firing them for their organizing activities by telling them that they were "too old and too ugly" to work at New Silver Palace. With steel-like determination, they stood up to their bosses and began to picket. Their bosses, unable to get rid of them, resorted to violence. Last October and November, their employers sent a group of men down to the picket area to physically attack some of the women. Understanding the importance of maintaining a voice on the picket line, the women went back to picket with new determination. They carried a coffin to help bury the sweatshop system in the restaurant and throughout the community. Now nearly 18 months later, victory is near.

Another inspiring example is Ms. Huang who like many garment workers had been forced to work insanely long hours. Ms. Huang worked overnight in sewing Street Beat Sportswear garments. She stood up in the frontline and led other injured garment workers in protest to expose the inhuman and the evil side of the sweatshop system. After her courageous example, more women with all sorts of different injuries and occupational health diseases came forward to demand the government investigate sweatshops, level stiffer penalties against law-breaking contractors, and change workers' compensation laws.

Women can lead and can make change happen. Last year, many women garment workers pushed for and attended the first Congressional hearing on U.S. sweatshops. The women who testified at the hearing strongly demanded Congress to introduce and enforce manufacturer and retailer accountability measures to improve the conditions in the garment industry. Shortly after the hearing, the Joint-Liability Law was passed in New York State.

For women like us who are exploited and who have never experienced the protection of the law or concern from our government officials, we need to come together and find ways to save ourselves. Women workers should join us and demand to have the right to a 40-hour workweek and a livable wage. We need to stand up now not only for ourselves but to protect the future for our children.



Ms. Eng has been working in Chinatown garment factories since the 1970's. She was one of the first women in 1992 to speak out against non-payment of wages at the factory where she had been working. She and her co-workers were one of the first groups of women to call for manufacturer accountability.