

**Invisible No More:
The Role of Training and Education in Increasing Union Activism of Chinese
Home Care Workers in Local 1199SEIU
United Healthcare Workers East (UHE)**

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In 2002 only a small number of Chinese home care workers represented by 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East (UHE) were involved in their union. Language, unfamiliarity with unions in the United States, and, in some cases, undocumented immigration status inhibited participation in the life of the union by the growing number of Chinese home care workers. Despite these obstacles in 2007 perhaps the most active segment of the 60,000 home care workers in 1199SEIU now comes from the approximately 10,000 Chinese home care workers. Today, Chinese home care workers are consistently overrepresented at union (not just home care) rallies and demonstrations and have helped organize several home care agencies, bringing significant numbers of additional Chinese workers into the union. Currently the Chinese home care workers are organizing retirees and expanding their involvement in the political life of their communities. Chinese home care workers have extended their activism into political participation in their communities and in the union's political program. Eighty to ninety percent of Chinese home care workers, who earn between \$7 and \$10 per hour and who cannot count on regular work contribute between \$5 and \$10 per month on top of their union dues to the union's political action committee, maybe the highest percentage in the union.

What makes this turnaround particularly significant is the role education and training played in the organizing. In 2003, 1199, assisted by Cornell University labor educators, launched a series of two-day training sessions for home care union activists facilitated in Cantonese and Mandarin.¹ Chinese home care activists trained as facilitators by 1199 led the training. To date the two-day activist training has been given thirteen times for over 700 Chinese home care workers who give up precious days to complete the training. Each new training session is eagerly awaited, and each new class has a waiting list of participants ready before it starts. Of those who have completed the activist training over 100 have attended additional training to become union delegates (stewards). This article will describe how the Chinese Activist Training was conceived, designed and presented.

**Background on 1199SEIU-UHE, Home Care and
the Chinese Home Care Workers**

Local 1199 has been a leader in organizing health care workers since the 1950s. Originally a union for pharmacists in New York City, the leftist, mostly Jewish leaders and members of Local 1199 began organizing in hospitals as part of a conscious effort to contribute to the growing civil rights movement. Hospital workers in New

Author's Note: The author is one of the designers of the program but was not involved during the five years since it was launched. This article follows a recent review of the Chinese Home Care Workers Activist Training by the Education Department of Local 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East and is based on examination of documents and interviews as well as the experience of the author during the early days of the project.

York City were largely Puerto Rican and African American women whose work was considered only a small step above volunteering. Compensation was among the lowest for all workers in the city. The National Labor Relations Act would not cover hospital workers for nearly two decades.

The first courageous hospital workers to organize were part of the nationwide civil rights movement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X supported 1199 strikes for recognition as did the New York City Central Labor Council led by Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Local 1199 won victories through militancy, political action and alliances with community, labor and political organizations and leaders. Local 1199 has grown through organizing and through a number of mergers to become today a regional union representing over 300,000 workers in hospitals, nursing homes, community based organizations and retail pharmacies from Washington, D.C. to Boston.

Local 1199 was also among the first unions in the nation to organize home care workers. In the 1980s, 1199 started home care organizing, and now the union's Home Care Division has over 70,000 members. The home care segment of the health care industry began in the 1980s as a less expensive and often more effective alternative to nursing home care. Patients, mostly elderly but also those recuperating from illness or surgery, were able to stay in their own homes with the assistance of a home care worker who aided them in household chores, kept them company, escorted them to doctor's appointments and helped them get around.

Besides the lack of overhead costs for facilities, the major reason home care is more cost effective than nursing homes is the low wages and meager benefits paid to the workers. In addition, as opposed to workers in a nursing home who have a fulltime job or regular part-time hours, home care workers have no guaranteed hours and get paid only when they work.

Thousands of Chinese workers were among the new home care members organized by 1199. However, few if any of the Chinese home care members were involved in any significant way in the life of the union. Approximately 80 percent of Local 1199's Chinese home care members work for agencies whose clients are also Chinese. For that reason the home care workers who speak Mandarin or Cantonese but little English can find work.

While the demand for Chinese-speaking home care workers has grown, the number of Chinese workers seeking employment has increased even more. As a result one of the facts of life of home care workers, Chinese and others, is that there is not enough employment for all those in the workforce.² Besides the difficulty in getting steady work the wages of between \$7 and \$10 per hour means it is not easy to make a living in home care.

On top of the other burdens of working in home care is the lack of status and recognition the workers receive. A slogan and rallying cry of home care workers in Local 1199 is, "Invisible No More." If the average home care worker felt invisible, perhaps the Chinese home care workers in Local 1199 were the invisibles within the invisibles.

Chinese Home Care Workers Begin to Become Visible

Prior to the internal organizing project started in 2002, most Chinese home care members in 1199 knew little about the union. Local 1199 had one Chinese-speaking organizer whose job was to bring new workers into the union but who had limited time to communicate with the new members as she worked on the next organizing

campaign. A group of the unionized Chinese home care workers wanted to get more involved in the union but were not able because of the language barrier.

A very limited amount of information about the union was provided to the workers in Chinese. The union's benefit fund had one employee who spoke Mandarin and Cantonese who provided service to those workers about how to use their health benefits. Kwai "David" Ho, the primary organizer for the Chinese home care workers, originally started working as a social work intern for the Local 1199 Benefit Fund's Member Assistance Program. The Member Assistance Program provides counseling and referrals to union members suffering from depression and dealing with family problems and other issues not directly arising from their jobs. A recent master's degree graduate from the Hunter College School of Social Work, Ho became known among the Chinese home care workers as not only someone who spoke their language but a caring, dedicated and helpful person. Based on his reputation and relationships with the Chinese home care workers the union hired David Ho as an organizer assigned to represent the home care agencies employing Chinese workers.

The majority of the Chinese workers in home care originated from Guangdong, Shanghai, and Fujian provinces, with others from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Some have been in the United States as many as twenty years, a significant number arrived within the last ten to fifteen years and others have come to the United States since then. "They came for the American dream, like other immigrants," according to Ho.

When talking to those workers, Ho discovered they felt great gratitude to have a Chinese-speaking organizer and a hunger for information about the union. As educated people with skilled jobs in China many of the workers were looking for challenges and opportunities to improve their situation and become more genuine contributors in their new home. As the main entity dedicated to helping them, the union became the focus of their efforts to get active.

Ho developed a core of Chinese home care workers who were eager to get more involved in the union. As they learned more they expressed their desire to become delegates, the volunteer elected position closest to the members. The union's unofficial policy at the time was that to be a delegate you must speak English, but Ho and the activists he organized kept inquiring about how they could get more involved in the union. Eventually after discussions with Gerry Hudson, the 1199 executive vice president responsible for education, Ho was authorized to talk to two labor educators in the New York City office of the Extension Division of the Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations, with long standing relationships with Local 1199, Jessica Go vea Thorbourne and Ken Margolies.

Leadership Support

Gerry Hudson and Aida Garcia, the executive vice president in charge of the Home Care Division of Local 1199, provided unconditional support for the activist training project. This was possible in part because of the confidence they had in David Ho and the Cornell team. But it also reflected their commitment to an inclusive union. When asked about the Chinese Activist Training for this article, Garcia said.

For many years we tried to involve the Chinese home care members in the union's struggles and activities. They would come to a meeting once, since the notice would go out in Chinese, but the information given at the meeting would be in English and

Spanish so they were not able to understand or participate and they did not return for another meeting. I hired David Ho so we could reach and involve those members. David expressed to me that we could not simply ask the Chinese home care members for political action contributions and other support for the union without educating them. I agreed and while it is a costly venture, some might say, it has produced priceless gains, (e-mail from Aida Garcia, April 19, 2007)

The Design Team

David Ho was the main representative of the union on the design team. Ho is a natural organizer who builds strong relationships with workers one-on-one and supports active community building among each other. When the Chinese internal organizing started producing real results many people within 1199 were surprised because Ho is understated and humble. He draws strength from his religious faith and shows a genuine love for the workers in the union.

Ho was assisted by Alan Chen, a bilingual employee of the 1199 Benefit Fund and professional interpreter as needed. The rest of the 1199 team were nine rank-and-file members who were to serve as facilitators of the training. The seven women and two men were chosen by David Ho because they were motivated and wanted to make improvements for their cultural group through having a voice in the union. Many of them were already assisting other members in their home care agencies and had shown the courage to speak out against injustices at work.

Each of the facilitators came with skills and talents in their area of work in China, but due to their lack of English skills they took jobs as home attendants in the United States. The nine included Yueh Hwa "Linda" Chan, formerly a business owner in Taiwan; Wen Zhi Gao, vice chair of a union at a chemical company in Guangzhou, China; Qing Hua Meng, formerly a business owner in Hong Kong; Jin Qing Li, formerly an officer in a government office in Taishan, China; Miao Rong Peng, formerly an executive accountant in Guangzhou, China; Qian Ya Luo, formerly doing work similar to that in a member assistance program for workers at an elevator company in Guangzhou, China; Su Er, formerly a teacher in China; Gui Chun Zheng, formerly a car driver in Shanghai, China; and Choi Mei Lee, formerly a clerical worker in a housing company in Guangzhou, China.

Jessica Govea Thorboume, from Cornell, worked in the fields of California starting at the age of four and was a founding member of the United Farm Workers of America. She worked as an organizer and consultant on numerous political and union organizing campaigns in Central America, New York, and California. During the original United Farm Workers of America grape boycott in the 1970s she organized support in Canada and Israel among other places. She had a firm conviction that inability to speak English should not be a barrier to union involvement. Her numerous accounts of the accomplishments of union activists and rank-and-file farm worker leaders who did not speak English, and in some cases were not literate in Spanish, inspired and guided the Chinese home care worker training project. She not only played a key role in the designing and producing of the activist training for Chinese home care workers but mentored the 1199 organizer David Ho. In 2005 this inspiring organizer, leader and educator succumbed to breast cancer after a twelve-year battle.

Ken Margolies, also from Cornell, worked in the labor movement for more than fifteen years as a representative, organizer, negotiator and educator for Local 715 SEIU in California, the Communications Workers

of America and the Teamsters, as well as ten years on the Cornell labor extension faculty. Margolies developed a close relationship with Local 1199 and particularly with Executive Vice President Gerry Hudson who was in charge of education from Local 1199, through years of contributing to training for the union's staff, delegates and officers. He and Govea Thorboume worked as a team on several projects including a three-year Leadership Development Campaign for Local 1199.

The Design Process With a Multilingual Team

Ho, Govea Thorboume, and Margolies began thinking about ways to satisfy the great hunger for information about the union among the Chinese activists. Govea Thorboume was familiar with the important role membership training played in the Farm Workers Union and more recently at the Workplace Center, a community organization of day laborers and other contingent workers on Long Island, New York. She suggested that the activist training be designed to be a gateway to greater involvement in the union. Not only would the participants learn information and skills, but the ambiance of the event should be one that created a sense of belonging, empowerment and solidarity among the participants. Everything about the training was to be rooted in the workers' own experiences, related to the current activities of Local 1199 and designed to empower the Chinese home care workers.

Previously Govea Thorboume and Margolies had designed training for delegates of 1199 and trained organizers (union staff) to facilitate that training. The train-the-trainer approach was well established within the union, but the Chinese activist training project went further by using the nine rank-and-file workers recruited by Ho as the facilitators among whom only two spoke English.

This led to a team effort where David Ho, Allan Chen and the translators became the link between the nine facilitators and Margolies and Govea Thorboume. As is usually the case in any field with technical language and specialized concepts, translation is more difficult. Literal translations often make no sense, and an interpreter who does not understand grievance procedures in a union setting cannot find the right words to describe it in Chinese. As a result, discussions within the team were slowed but perhaps more thorough than if they had been held among only English speakers.

In sessions with the facilitators, Govea Thorboume and Margolies presented examples of training exercises the union was providing to delegates. Then the team would discuss which if any of those examples would be appropriate for the activist training they were designing. This process involved regular consultations by the committee in Chinese. During those discussions Ho would frequently return to English to ask the labor educators a question or to get clarification of a concept and then continue the discussion in Chinese. Sometimes the facilitators were trying to better understand something themselves, and other times they were brainstorming with each other ways they could express the concepts to their Chinese-speaking co-workers.

However, designing the training became much more than finding the best way to translate existing training material. There were demonstrations of various training exercises by the labor educators delivered in English and translated for the facilitators so they could see and experience them. Throughout the process the team determined the topics, approaches and methods of training that were most appropriate and useful for the potential activists who

would be attending the sessions. As the facilitators gained confidence they "owned" the development process. The many sessions became genuine collaboration between facilitators, labor educators, union staff and translators.³

An example of that process is illustrated by how the team determined the best way to introduce the participants to what a union is. Based on experiences with immigrants from the former Soviet bloc (other than Poland) Margolies thought the Chinese home care workers would have ideas about unions based on their experiences in the People's Republic of China (PRC) that would have to be undone. This negative effect on receptivity to unionization among immigrants from the PRC was observed by Miriam J. Wells (2000) a hotel worker organizing in San Francisco. She said, "Immigrant Chinese workers, especially those from the mainland, tend to be less initially receptive (to unions). Because of their experience in China, they think of unions as outside forces, arms of the government, rather than organizations formed by and for workers" (p. 119). After discussing a proposed exercise with the facilitators Ho explained that although some of the workers did have negative associations with unions in the PRC they already knew that so many things about the United States were different from their previous experience. Their positive relationship with Ho also convinced them that Local 1199 was quite different from unions they left behind in the PRC. Instead, facilitators felt it was important to clarify the difference between working in home care with a union as compared to working nonunion. This became the basis for the opening exercise of the activist training and segued into training on the basic provisions of the contract.

As Ho and the facilitators asserted themselves the team focused less on reviewing and adapting existing training and more on the topics home care workers wanted to know more about. These were nuts and bolts basics every worker wants and needs. Some of those were addressed by creating a guide written in Chinese to various contract provisions. This was used in an exercise where typical situations like working on a holiday and use of sick leave were given to small groups of participants. The groups were asked to find in the contract guide what was said about each situation. Reports from the groups led to discussions that deepened the participants' understanding of how contracts work.

The section of the contract concerning pay was of particular interest to the members in the training. Given the complicated way home care workers' pay is determined many home care members called the union because they believed their paychecks were incorrect. The facilitators developed training tools such as a mock pay stub and a pay scale chart. The pay stub was a large version of a home care worker's typical pay stub in English and Chinese with notes explaining what each notation meant and how to check whether each was correct. Workers were advised how to keep their own records of their work so they could verify management's calculations. The pay chart allowed a home care worker to find the appropriate pay level for the length of his or her employment and for each of the various assignments, schedules, clients, etc. In the training participants were given various types of work and asked to find on the chart what they should be paid. The chart was so useful and popular an English version became part of training for home care delegates and was distributed to members throughout the Local 1199 Home Care Division.

Questions about low pay and poor benefits led to developing training exercises that showed participants how home care was financed.⁴ Most home care members, regardless of how long they have lived in New York, do not understand the political process that determines home care funding levels. The Chinese workers were also

unfamiliar with lobbying as practiced by unions in the United States. As part of that training the team put together a role-play to demonstrate home care workers lobbying a member of the New York City Council. Not long after, the participants of the training were part of teams that visited and lobbied actual City Council members.

Members asked about how dues and political action committee contributions are spent, and so staff from various Local 1199 departments were invited to give short presentations to the design team for consideration as part of the final training. A slide show about the history, structure and goals of Local 1199 was adapted and translated into Chinese. The design process continued through several test rehearsals where the overall agenda, individual training exercises, homework assignments and other aspects of the training were tested and refined.

Reflections on the Design Process

The 1199 officers and staff and the Cornell labor educators were aware that the approach they were taking to design the training was very time intensive. It would have taken a fraction of the time for Govea Thorbourne and Margolies to design the training and prepare Ho and others who were bilingual to deliver it to the members. To the credit of the 1199 decision-makers they saw value in a more time consuming and participatory approach as a worthwhile investment in multi-skill and multi-level development.

In addition to helping design the most relevant training possible the design process built a strong core of committed leaders and facilitators skilled in analysis, decision-making and relating to their co-workers. Following the design process the rank-and-file activists were coached to facilitate the training they helped to design. This added to their confidence and solidarity as a team and moved them profoundly.

At the end of the design phase and facilitator preparation the team debriefed the experience. The facilitators expressed the deep impact the process had on them. They explained in various ways how for the first time since coming to the United States they felt that they were making an important contribution and were a real part of their union and adopted country. Immanuel Ness (2005), in his book *Immigrants, Unions and the New U.S. Labor Market*, said, "The research suggests that immigrant workers must have autonomy and control over their organizations, which will otherwise be viewed by their members with distrust and cynicism and will eventually die" (p. 194). Local 1199's investment in the design of the activist training illustrates Ness's point.

The Content and Delivery of the Training

As a matter of course the labor educators and Local 1199 were inclined to design training using participatory, experiential, popular education methods. Organizer David Ho explained a cultural reason why such approaches were necessary with the Chinese home care workers. He said, "With workers from China you don't 'teach' them, but share with them. You must respect them. They are skeptical because they have experienced 'teaching' as changing their minds to be 'correct.'"

The potential union activists received the first activist training not with skepticism but with enthusiasm. They were pleased to get training in their own language that was facilitated by co-workers whom they knew and respected. The topics were those they requested. Officers of the union and representatives of the Benefit Funds and

several union departments were going to address them. Nearly every aspect of planning and executing of the training involved hard work by numerous participants and other members. This was their event.

At the first training, conducted at a union hall on two Saturdays, excitement and energy were in the air. Continental breakfast and lunch were provided by the union. The fact that the class was being offered at all was seen as bestowing important recognition on them from their union.

There were a number of times when the whole group of over seventy members was in session together, such as when they were greeted by officers and activist home care workers of other ethnicities. However, the real work of the training happened in smaller workshops facilitated by the activist leaders.⁵

Activists were given an assignment to complete between the two Saturdays. The training had been scheduled so the two sessions were before and after an important rally for a living wage ordinance that would raise the pay of home care workers. Each member attending the training had the assignment to talk to up to twenty-five members about the importance of the rally and ask them to attend. Each participant in the class was given a chart to track who they spoke to, the date of each contact, whether the members said they would attend the rally, and when the activist reminded those members who said they would attend of the date and location of the event. There was also a column to record which of the members contacted actually showed up in front of city hall. Before the first day of training ended the participants role-played how they would approach and talk to their co-workers as well as record the results. They were coached on how to tell whether someone was just saying yes to end the conversation or if they really intended to attend.

The day of the rally marked the end of being invisible for the Chinese home care workers within Local 1199. The organizing effort to build turnout was overwhelmingly successful and dramatic in its results. The approximately sixty activists through their homework assignment brought 800 of their co-workers to the rally. Perhaps more impressive was when on the second day of training the activists reported what was on their charts. It became clear the activists had done their job well as nearly everyone who committed to attend the rally showed up.

This great achievement added to the pride and solidarity felt by the class participants. The feeling that this was a special event permeated the second day of training from the discussions among the activists before the training started, to the workshop sessions through the ending ceremonies and celebration with a special cake.

Accomplishments of the Continuing Activist Training

The first activist training classes as well as those that followed produced a significant number of new union delegates who received more training. Volunteering for the union is popular among Chinese home care workers and even some of their family members. David Ho says, "Members I don't know often call me to ask how they can get involved in the union. When our delegates or I call members to ask them to participate in one activity or another they usually already know something about it and are very receptive."

The Chinese home care delegates meet quarterly, with 40 to 50 attending out of a total of 100. Ho says more would attend but many can't because of their work schedules. They and the other activists have helped organize additional Chinese home care agencies into the union. Local 1199 Chinese activists are very involved in

community politics in their neighborhoods, registering and educating voters, holding candidate forums and holding leadership positions in the Chinese American Voters Federation in New York City.

Update

Not long after the first activist training in 2003 Local 1199 hired a second Chinese language-speaking organizer, Henry Ye. Ho and Ye mentor, coach, develop and support a large number of delegates, activists and volunteers. They also constantly look for new leaders and activists. Home care workers are subject to all the stresses and pulls that make participation in any organization challenging. To build and maintain a high level of activity requires constant organizing, developing and support of new leaders and activists. The activist training plays a key role in keeping a stable number of delegates and activists as well as creating a large base of educated members. In nearly four years the activist training has been offered thirteen times, still with high participation. Members are eager to enroll in each new class.

In 2004 Nrinder Nann was appointed the education director at 1199SEIU-UHE following Gerry Hudson's election to executive vice president of the International SEIU. Nann came from the Canadian labor movement with extensive experience in popular education, anti-oppression training and community-based worker organizing models with young workers, workers of color and women workers. She introduced new ideas and methods to 1199's education programs and reviewed the activist training in 2005 and 2006 with the facilitator pool, Chinese Activist Training coordinators and David Ho.

The content of the training evolved, but the basic concepts remained the same. Trainers added a role-play to help the activists better understand economic, political and social power and a chart showing how the government works, translated to Chinese. A closing activity was added to meet the goal of building unity and creating links of shared realities among workers of color who step forward into leadership and activist roles. This activity is an interactive story telling of Rosa Park's journey from seamstress, to union activist, to civil rights leader, originally developed by the Canadian Postal Workers. Participants have remarked on the powerful spirit of the activity and on the necessity of building across ethnic backgrounds towards union leadership.

Another addition was a celebration of completion of the two-day program. The participant group meets one evening for dinner, a certificate ceremony, remarks from union leadership, and cultural performances among their peer group. This celebration adds to the building of community among participants and gives due recognition to workers who choose to take a more active role in the union.

In the 2006 Chinese Activist Training report Nann and Ho concluded that the curriculum, level of participation and enthusiasm, learning environment and group solidarity at the training were all good. They also concluded that the skills of the facilitators could be sharpened. As a result all the facilitators were enrolled in the union's new three-day Popular Education Facilitation and Design Course which teaches the interactive learning technique popularized by Brazilian educator Paulo Friere, aimed at connecting personal experiences and larger societal problems while providing empowerment for action to effect change.

The Chinese Activist Training is now offered on several different days of the week to reach more activists. Rank-and-file workers have a strong sense of ownership of the program, and volunteers continue to make logistical

arrangements, see that facilitators have the supplies and tools they need and remind those who sign up to attend. A committee of delegates does outreach to members they think will make good activists while the Education Department provides a facilitator preparation session before each two-day training session where new facilitators are partnered with veteran facilitators.

Conclusion

The activist training for Chinese home care workers in Local 1199SEIU-UHE offers a hopeful example of a method of establishing and maintaining a high level of union awareness and involvement by immigrant union members. The challenge raised by this experience is whether it can be adapted, replicated and established for other immigrant and language groups and become an important part of renewal of the U.S. labor movement.

Notes

1. Spoken Mandarin and Cantonese are different dialects which will sometimes be referred to in this article as "Chinese." The written language is referred to only as "Chinese" since both Mandarin and Cantonese speakers use the same written language.

2. The quest for hours is complicated. Each agency employs coordinators whose job is to match clients with home care workers. The coordinators balance a number of factors in deciding whom to dispatch to a client. These may include special skills needed, including language. While the union contract says that seniority is to be *considered* when other factors are equal, rarely is it enforceable. Medicare and Medicaid decide how many hours of home care they will fund for each client. This means a home care worker could be assigned to a client for four hours a day without an assignment for the rest of the day. Since there are more workers than suitable clients Chinese home care workers may have to wait weeks or months to get another assignment. To make ends meet workers rely on a combination of unemployment insurance and other jobs. Some home care members work out of more than one agency. Others do "replacement work," which means they are substitutes on call when another home care worker with a regular assignment is sick or absent for another reason.

3. The design process consisted of approximately eight days over a two-month period. Sessions were scheduled around the facilitators' workdays as home care workers since they attended them on their own unpaid time.

4. In New York home care is funded 50 percent by the federal government, 40 percent by the state and 10 percent by the city. However, the city's 10 percent triggers matching funds from the state and federal government, so the focus of lobbying was the New York City Council.

5. The topics on the agenda for the two days of training included 1199SEIU-UHE history and structure and services from the various departments, the role of a union activist and what it means to be a delegate, health and other benefits, the union contract, agency (employer) policy, how the home care industry is funded, political action, how government works and talking to members about the union one-on-one.

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