



## Sisters at the Borders

# Asian Immigrant Women & HERE Local 2

■ *Patricia Lee*

On one of my first days of work as a roomcleaner at a major downtown San Francisco hotel, I was stopped at the employee entrance by an immigration officer and asked to show my identification. Once inside the hotel, I saw many workers desperately phoning their relatives, others escaping through the back doors, and others using various delaying tactics in answering the officers' questions.

My first impression of this confused scene was that everyone understood what was happening that day—an immigration raid by "la Migra" (the U.S. Immigration & Naturalization Service). Despite the fact that most were either legal residents or naturalized citizens, all the workers felt threatened by the raid and understood their powerlessness in the face of such brute authority. But the guests, mostly businessmen and tourists from the Midwest, were completely unaware of the drama unfolding around them. They hardly noticed that the sheets were changed a little later than usual or that food service was slower.

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Raids like the one I experienced that day have been repeated thousands of times in hundreds of workplaces, and have become a common feature in American life. With employer sanctions officially taking effect this year (under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986), every place of employment will be involved in this national witchhunt for undocumented workers. Each immigrant worker and naturalized citizen will be surrounded by a cloud of suspicion as to the validity of their identity and documents. Non-immigrants will be swept into the broad intimidation and repression that la Migra's raids encourage.

The main factor that will prevent la Migra from making a clean sweep of the estimated 2 million undocumented workers who won't qualify for amnesty under the new law is that they are irreplaceable. Immigrant workers, both legal and undocumented, are part of the structure of this nation's economy. They perform the hard and dirty work the rest of us don't want to do—washing dishes, cleaning rooms, picking fruit, sewing garments and assembling personal computers. Since they can't be removed without damaging the entire economy, it is long overdue for institutions of this society to recognize their importance and extend to them the rights and benefits they deserve.

This article tells the story of a local union and a community group who, in pursuit of multinational and multiracial solidarity within their own organizations, have coalesced to help immigrants defend themselves against the exploitation they inevitably face in the workplace. In both cases, women provided the leadership that made these efforts possible, efforts that may harbingers a broader view of working class solidarity in the American labor movement.

### **Immigrants and Unions**

In a competitive society like the U.S., there's no such thing as a free lunch—immigrants will not receive their due recognition until they get organized.

Traditionally, immigrants have gotten themselves together through two types of organizations—labor unions and community agencies, including those operated by churches. Labor unions, the vehicles that worked so well for earlier Irish, Jewish, Italian and Eastern European immigrants, have not been anywhere near as receptive to non-white immigrants. The fact of the matter is that labor unions in the past have too often been in the forefront of outright exclusion (as in their agitation for the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882), against affirmative action for women and minorities,

and even involved in union-busting of minority-led organizing drives (witness the United Farm Workers' problems with the Teamsters).

Today, however, unions are facing a generational crisis. While the leadership remains predominantly older white males, the membership is increasingly minority, immigrant and female. The globalization of the economy has meant the loss of traditional blue-collar jobs to the Third World and the decline of the once mighty industrial core of the AFL-CIO. In order to compensate for their reduced numbers, unions have turned increasingly to the workforce of unorganized service workers, mainly minorities, women and immigrants.

Though unions are beginning to recognize that if they do not become more inclusive of immigrants organized labor will cease to be a force within American society, many union leaders can't decide whether they should embrace or exclude immigrant workers. The AFL-CIO, for example, supported the Immigration Reform & Control Act, which is essentially a plan to force the firing of undocumented workers who cannot qualify for amnesty. One of the false assumptions of the union leaders is that "foreigners" are trying to take away jobs from Americans and are part of the cause of problems in the economy.

This naive point of view demonstrates that the union leadership does not fully understand the current transition in the U.S. economy. The economic disruptions caused by employer sanctions and the increased interference by the INS into personnel offices will ultimately hurt all American workers. Solidarity with immigrants is the only way unions can protect their members.

Immigrant workers find the package offered by unions—higher wages, health insurance, pensions and other benefits—to be attractive. But for many unions that package fails to include an aggressive fight against deportations and other problems immigrant workers face. A widespread perception among immigrant workers is that union leaders have maintained sweetheart contracts with employers and that while always ready to collect dues, many unions are less than eager to file grievances. Even when unions recognize immigrant needs, they have trouble getting their message to the unorganized because they are not equipped with enough bilingual staff and organizers drawn from the existing rank and file.

Thus unions have two major barriers to overcome in order to successfully organize and involve immigrant workers. The first is to promote immigrant leaders and develop programs that address immigrant needs. Secondly, unions must change their public image, which may sometimes require changes in their substance.

## HERE Local 2

The Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) Local 2, the union to which I belong, has developed a number of innovative programs aimed at greater immigrant participation.

HERE Local 2 represents 13,000 workers in the hotel and restaurant industries in the San Francisco area. More than half our members are women and about 70% are people of color, the majority of whom are Third World immigrants from around the world. These are the roomcleaners, bellhops, dishwashers, cooks, waiters, waitresses and bartenders who perform the job of making a pleasant stay for an ever-expanding tourist trade. A small percentage of the workers earn a good salary, but these are mainly white workers who are able to enter "the front of the house" jobs in the Class A restaurants. The majority of the workforce is locked into "the back of the house" unseen and unheard, performing menial labor. Despite these divisions, workers in San Francisco fare better than their counterparts in the rest of the country due to an aggressive rank and file and a leadership that has responded to the demands and issues of its members.

In the past 17 years, Local 2's militant rank and file has reformed the union's organizational structure, resulting in better representation and improved contract terms. These changes were due to a number of factors. One is that in the 1960s and 1970s the workforce dramatically changed from primarily European immigrants and black and white Americans to a rainbow of Third World immigrants with a variety of languages and the cultural differences to match. As this group expanded, the union leadership of the time failed to represent them and their working conditions deteriorated. Following the transformation, a significant number of student radicals entered the industry, carrying with them all the militancy of the college campuses of the time. The meeting of the two provided an explosive combination that led to a tumultuous period of political strife within the local. As this dynamic duo set about organizing itself, women and immigrant workers filled the vacuum of leadership that eventually led to an overhaul of the union.

With many of the new members turning out to vote, union elections became a major forum for advocating demands and exposing atrocious working conditions. It became matter of fact that if you ran for union office, your slate had to represent the diverse ethnic make-up of the union, with women right in there.

In the most recent elections in 1985, seven candidates vied to lead this greatly divergent and vibrant rank and file. The only two women running for the top office of president could not unify any



HERE Local 2

of the slates around their candidacies. One of the factors was the belief that "our members will not elect a woman." But the two women, both in their early 30s, one of whom was Chinese, defied all prejudices and came in as the top votegetters, with the five men trailing far behind.

Today, with its first woman president, the local is in the process of a complete overhaul. Union staff is now majority women, with large minority representation and many people who speak more than one language. A new committee structure has been developed to bring onto the committees members of every race, nationality, sex, age and every department in each workplace to ensure full representation. The intent of the committees is to organize the workforce for contract fights, to win grievances, organize non-union establishments, and to take on issues like the new Immigration Reform law. While constituencies continue to organize along racial and gender lines, it has been mainly done by appealing to the support and unity of all members. Victories

have come about when the committees have effectively organized around issues that cross racial and gender lines while addressing individual group needs.

Throughout Local 2's past 17-year evolution, women have been prominent leaders in the course of activity. Because of their vocalness, women's issues have often formed the rallying point for change.

The most dramatic mass movement in support of women occurred in the 1980 hotel strike, covering 6,500 workers, when there was overwhelming support for the demands of militant immigrant women roomcleaners who were protesting horrendous working conditions. In culmination of a five-year battle with hotel owners and a lot of anger directed at the union leadership, the whole union walked in support of these women. The roomcleaners won all their major demands, which included a reduction in workload, participation of women in the grievance procedure, and a larger percentage increase in pay over the other crafts.

One of the programs our local has developed to serve our immigrant members is a legal counseling program, through which members get free legal advice on whether they qualify for amnesty or refugee status and legal assistance with other immigration problems. This is particularly important to immigrant workers because of the legal maze the INS has set up and the way employers exploit this maze to intimidate workers, but the counseling program is available to all our members.

The local has made an effort to develop a strong "core leadership" of shop stewards and house committee members who are bilingual in Spanish, Chinese, Korean and other languages. As a result the local's field representatives can now conduct grievances and organize around numerous issues alongside bilingual rank-and-file leaders. The immigrant workers can fully express their testimony and opinions, and participate in the union structure and grievance process. Multi-lingual literature and translation at meetings has also proven effective, especially before and during contract negotiations. The local is able to survey the issues of concern to immigrants and get their input on all contractual terms before collective bargaining begins.

Through a developed committee structure of several layers, immigrant participation in the life of the union has been consistently high. Much of the committee work is aimed at "actions" during contract negotiations—actions like street rallies, demonstrations, nonviolent sit-ins, and "dinner-a-thons" where large groups of workers occupy a restaurant during peak periods eating soup, thereby filling seats that would ordinarily be taken by higher-

paying customers.

While these programs have had a very positive response from both immigrants and the general membership, there is still far to go, especially in terms of developing immigrant leaders from the rank and file. Most of the immigrant workers have families, large rent payments, relatives in need back in their homelands, and many other pressures. Given their immediate situations, it has been very difficult for leaders to emerge and accept the added responsibilities of union leadership. We will also soon face the difficult problem of sanctuary for undocumented and refugees who don't qualify for amnesty.

### **Asian Immigrant Women Advocates**

As Local 2 developed these new programs, it often became necessary to seek help from organizations with roots in the various ethnic communities. We simply did not have the skills and elements to reach all the racial and national groups within Local 2's membership. One such group exists within the Asian community, the Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA).

The Asian immigrant population has expanded enormously because of Southeast Asians leaving the devastation of the Vietnam War, Filipinos and Koreans escaping political dictatorships and oppressive economic conditions, and Hong Kong residents migrating in anticipation of Hong Kong's incorporation into the People's Republic of China in 1992. Many of these immigrants begin their U.S. employment in the hotel and restaurant industries, most in non-union jobs. For the most part, the Asian ethnic groups coexist harmoniously, with the main racial tensions occurring with whites who fear a "yellow peril" and non-Asian ethnic groups who are fighting to survive in already crowded communities with diminishing social services. There exists a dichotomy between recent immigrants and American-born Asians who feel the anti-Asian backlash of the overall population, but it is often the Asian-Americans who come together with their bilingual Asian counterparts to meet the challenges facing the Asian community. Such was the case with AIWA.

AIWA was the brainchild of Elaine Kim, a first-generation Korean-American who was then executive director of the Korean Community Center of the East Bay. Founded in 1982, AIWA was directed at women because of the pivotal role they play in the American economy by occupying many low-paying jobs such as maids, waitresses and seamstresses. Exploited beyond imagination, their economic contribution to the health of their communities



is severely limited. Ms. Kim and other Asian-American women saw the devastating impact on Asian communities of the poor working conditions the immigrant women suffer. In defiance of stereotypes and patriarchal cultural obstacles, AIWA went about the task of organizing these women to change the world within which they live.

Today, Yong Shin, Korean-American director of AIWA, and her multi-ethnic staff perform a crucial role in involving immigrant Asian women in the life of the union and within their workplaces. AIWA offers educational services to Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipina working women. Instructors provide courses in English as a second language, structured to meet the needs of adult working women. AIWA also provides workshops on contract rights, federal and state labor regulations, health and safety rules, and hourly wage laws.

Most of Local 2's immigrant women members originate from countries where labor codes are weak and enforcement is practically non-existent. In places like Korea and Taiwan, for example, a complaint to the authorities will usually lead to harassment from employers or immediate firing. Since notices are not often posted in factories in such authoritarian societies, workers are not aware that they might have the right to complain. In contrast, the immigrant women now find themselves within a society which expects people to complain.

Managers often take advantage of the immigrants' ignorance of the contract and laws to illegally exploit them. Overtime without pay and denial of rest periods and lunch breaks are common abuses in the hotel trade. Immigrant roomcleaners and kitchen workers often get blamed for accidents instead of pointing to dangerous working conditions, such as slippery floors or exposure to dangerous chemicals. AIWA has informed the women about how to use the union grievance procedure and the laws to fight back.

While offering its services, AIWA has carefully maintained its non-partisan status in relation to the union and the employers. The role of AIWA has been to assist immigrant women in actively expressing their concerns to their employer, union, government and the larger society. AIWA has independently helped immigrant women dialogue with their employers by offering translation services and organizational skills. The organization has also served as a bridge between the Asian community and Local 2.

In their job training programs, AIWA often encourages women to enter the unionized sector of the hotel industry, where many jobs require little English language skill. A job in a San Francisco

hotel is a major advantage over working in non-union garment factories or restaurants, where wages fall below federal minimums and benefits are nonexistent. For the first time, these women will earn a decent wage and unheard-of benefits like medical, dental and pension benefits, paid vacations, sick leave and holidays, a seniority system, and a grievance procedure. Although union contracts in the tourist trade often fall behind those of most industrial workers, a union hotel job remains a major improvement to these women's lives as they begin to make important economic contributions to their family units, which are the heart and soul of their communities.

AIWA has assisted the immigrant women in learning about unions, exercising their contractual rights, and increasing their participation in union affairs. In order to do so, however, the AIWA staff had to first "break the ice."

One of the large Nob Hill hotels employs Korean women as roomcleaners. Some of the women are wives of former U.S. military personnel, with little social contact with the larger society. Most are not very fluent in English and some belong to conservative churches. Because of the extreme anti-labor climate in South Korea, their attitude toward the union initially was one of fear and suspicion. AIWA organized Korean-style dinners for the women as an opportunity for social activity. The response from the women was overwhelmingly positive. The social meetings provided the women a chance to overcome their isolation and to reassert their cultural identity. These meetings also served to introduce the women to representatives from the local union in a manner less threatening than an invitation to a union meeting. Instead of the women coming to the union's "turf," the union was willing to meet them on their ground.

As a result of such activities immigrant women have become increasingly involved in union affairs, studying and enforcing the contract, walking picket lines, serving on committees and taking their rightful place as union leaders.

### **Conclusion**

AIWA stands as a multi-ethnic organization that breaks through the barriers between various Asian immigrant communities who can barely speak to one another, let alone work together. The difficulties in maintaining and expanding such an organization are substantial, but they are matched by the dedication and fervor of AIWA's leadership and by a group of Asian women who can see the value of crossing cultural and ethnic lines to pursue

economic and political power.

The innovative work of Local 2 and AIWA is one of many examples throughout the country among hotel, restaurant, hospital, garment and manufacturing unions and a diverse array of immigrant groups, including Central Americans, Mexicans, Haitians and Asians. These programs are pushing unions and community organizations to re-evaluate their traditional attitudes and policies in light of recent economic patterns. It is no accident that women, in the ranks and in leadership roles, are at the forefront of those doing the pushing.

There are very hopeful signs of change in the union leadership. At its last convention, for example, the HERE International voted to oppose the Simpson-Rodino immigration bill as racially discriminatory and anti-labor. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) has taken strong measures, including class action court cases, against INS factory raids. Across the country, many locals and local labor councils have become increasingly aware of the need to protect the civil and labor rights of immigrant workers.

Immigrant and minority communities also need to re-examine their traditional attitudes toward unions. The Asian-American community, especially, feels victimized and scapegoated by labor unions. Their experience with labor's past exclusionist agitation, advocacy of job discrimination, outright racist violence, and the recent wave of Asian-bashing has left a negative impression on Asians. Without overlooking these problems, however, community organizations need to recognize that unions have provided an important means for upward mobility for minorities and immigrants. Living conditions within the community are directly dependent on wage levels and employment benefits. Minority wage earners who are union members are able to provide for their families and the larger community far better than those locked into non-union sweatshops.

Because of the internationalization of the world economy, local industries and communities have become very fragile. In this insecure environment, unions and community organizations are by necessity going to have to become far more interdependent. Both are going to have to learn to work better with people and institutions who are very different than themselves if multinational, multiracial worker solidarity is to be achieved. This process will redefine the social agenda as we have known it, and, if the experience of HERE Local 2 and AIWA is any guide, women will be initiators and leaders in this struggle. ■