

# Organizing Asian Americans into Labor Unions

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## Introduction

Historically and currently, unions have been an important vehicle for engaging the public in civic activities. Unions have a long history of political mobilization, including endorsing candidates for state, local, and national elections, and using their members to get out the vote for candidates who can advance workers' interests (Kuttner 1987; Ferguson and Rogers 1986). As with the case of other racial minorities, however, the history of labor unions and organizing Asians has been blemished by a racially exclusionary past.

Fortunately, times have changed and so have labor unions. Beginning in the late twentieth century, efforts by unions to organize Asians have been fruitful for both unions and workers, recruiting thousands of Asians as union members, raising wages and increasing workplace democracy. Moreover, through participating in union activities that impart political knowledge and leadership skills, Asian Americans have become active in a broad range of civic activities, ranging from political mobilization efforts, get out the vote efforts, and greater community involvement.

This chapter surveys the history of labor unions, including their different strategies for civic engagement and the extent to which they organized Asian workers. It examines unions as a cross-ethnic institution that builds the capacity for civic engagement — including developing leadership potential — by providing skills, experience, and opportunities that allow workers to be involved and effective. Particular attention is paid to the Asian and Pacific American Labor Association's (APALA) efforts to organize and politically mobilize Asian Americans. The chapter concludes with assessing the challenges, as

well as the future, of organizing Asians into labor unions.

For the purposes of this chapter, civic engagement is defined as participation in one's community (local, national or global) with the purpose of influencing, improving or participating in society as a politically informed or engaged citizen. This definition includes: participating in community or organizational activities and events with the goal of aiding or improving the community or its members; understanding the needs or problems that community members face; keeping informed about the community and world events; or aiding society in other ways that bring about positive change or increase the understanding of a community or social problem (e.g. writing, lecturing, teaching, organizing activities, fundraising, and/or participating in the political process).

The latter part of this essay draws from the experience, knowledge and insights from the nation's top Asian labor leaders, including: May Chen, International Vice President of UNITE/HERE and Manager of Local 23-25 in New York City, who is a leader in organizing, educating and representing garment workers and other Asian immigrant workers; Maria Somma, Health Care Organizing Coordinator of the United Steelworkers and President of APALA, who has been a leader in organizing nurses and other health care professionals, occupations which employ large numbers of Asians; Gloria T. Caoile, Executive Director of APALA and former assistant to the president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), who has been instrumental in organizing professional workers as well as casino workers, significant segments of the population of unionized Asians; and Kent Wong, Director of the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education and the founding president of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA). Phone interviews of these labor leaders were conducted during the summer and fall of 2007.

In addition, this chapter draws from previous research, "Women of Color and Unions," in *Perspectives on Work* (see Kim 2005), and the phone interview of Katie Quan during August of 2004 which informed this publication. Ms. Quan is the former International Vice President of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) and is currently Associate Chair of the Center for

Labor Research and Education at the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, University of California, Berkeley. She was instrumental in organizing garment workers in New York City as well as Asian workers in San Francisco. I thank all of these truly extraordinary labor leaders for their insights on this topic. They continue to be leaders in the labor movement and a true inspiration for myself and for many others.

## **A Brief History of Labor Unions and Asian Workers**

Historically, labor unions have sought to improve the standard of living for workers through collective action, thus the very activity of organizing and working together to achieve the common goal of workplace improvement has required civic engagement. Because labor unions used different strategies to improve working people's lives, the type of civil engagement they employed varied over time.<sup>1</sup>

One of the earliest strategies was overtly political. In 1828, the first labor party in the United States was founded when the Philadelphia Mechanics Union of Trade Associations transformed itself into the Workingmen's Party. As with labor parties that exist in other countries today, the idea behind this strategy was to become a political party similar to the Democrat and Republican political parties. As a labor party, it would nominate and then try to elect one of its members to local public office who would pass legislation favorable towards improving all workers' (not just its own members) and working class' lives. Such legislative goals included universal and free education, the ten-hour work day (the work day at that time was twelve hours), the right to vote for those without property, eradicating debtors' prison and monopolies, prohibiting child labor, and ending the compulsory militia. Other unions replicated this strategy, and soon labor parties sprouted in other cities, including New York, Boston, Newark, and Pittsburgh. In part, this strategy was successful; its platform was adopted by the then-Democratic Party of Andrew Jackson, but the depressions in 1828-31 and 1837-50 destroyed these new political parties.

In 1869, the Knights of Labor was formed. It followed another strategy to improve the bargaining clout of workers: an inclusive

union. Membership was open to workers and non-workers, the unemployed, farmers, shopkeepers, small employers, and skilled and unskilled workers. Even black workers, who were usually excluded from organized labor during this time, were allowed to join this union. The idea behind the strategy of “one big union” was that if everyone belonged to the same union, its large membership would exert enough power so that employers would meet their demands.

The political platform of the Knights of Labor included an eight-hour work day (the work day by then was ten hours), homesteading on public land, prohibiting child labor, establishing income and inheritance taxes, and adult education. They followed a strategy of “revolutionary unionism”—so named because of their desire to transform the economic system into one of worker cooperatives. To this end they organized communities and educated them about the problems of the capitalist economic system. The height of the Knights of Labor was the movement for the eight-hour work day in 1886, which culminated in a nationwide strike, involving 300,000 workers from Kentucky, Texas, and Virginia to St Louis, Detroit, Grand Rapids, New York, Boston, and New Haven. Workers across European ethnicities — Poles, Germans, Bohemians — united across the U.S. by walking off their jobs and into the street.

In 1886, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was founded. It followed yet a third strategy to improve workers’ lives. Known as “business unionism,” the AFL tried to improve the wages and working conditions of its members through collective bargaining, a process of reaching an agreement between workers and their employers regarding workers’ wages, working conditions, training and other terms of employment. The impetus for employers to reach an agreement with workers and avoid a strike was the loss of sales and revenue during a strike; for workers, the motivation was the loss of earnings. Thus the mutual economic benefit that employers and employees provided each other (jobs and wages for employees, sales and production for employers) and the fact that each would suffer an economic loss if an agreement were not reached provided a mutual incentive to be reasonable during negotiations and to reach a settlement.

Members of craft unions that formed the AFL included highly-

skilled trade workers such as blacksmiths, carpenters, masons, coopers, tailors, and printers. These unions only admitted those working in their craft, thus omitting unskilled and semi-skilled workers entirely. This strategy of exclusion was purposeful: the bargaining power of these skilled workers was achieved by restricting those who could learn and perform their craft, effectively limiting competition for their jobs. Thus the AFL unions bargained to control the apprenticeship program, including who can become apprentices, and in doing so, kept out of the craft any outsiders, which usually included immigrant and black workers.

This strategy of exclusion worked. The high skill level of these craft workers and their limited numbers gave them bargaining power to demand relatively high wages when economic times were good. When times were bad, however, even skilled workers failed to maintain their living standards.

Besides being exclusionary, the AFL unions largely ignored political and electoral activities, including political and reformist policies. Historically they opposed policies like the minimum wage and Social Security that could help a wide swath of workers beyond their members. Instead, AFL unions concentrated only on immediate wage increases and job related issues for their own members. Because they only helped their own members and excluded many, most workers failed to benefit from their actions. Thus, both historically and currently, AFL unions have been relatively more politically conservative and exclusionary in practice than unions that have followed other strategies of improving workers' lives, such as the CIO.

The Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), first established in 1935 as the Committee of Industrial Organization<sup>ii</sup>, followed yet a fourth strategy — one of industrial unionism. The CIO organized all workers along industry lines — skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled — who worked in mass-produced industries. Thus there would be one union for all workers in the auto industry, including semi-skilled, unskilled, and skilled, though they might work for General Motors, Chrysler, or Ford. There would be another union for all workers in steel, and another for those in rubber. The idea behind this strategy is that the union gains power from having everyone organized in one industry. If every worker in one industry, like auto, belonged to one

union, such as the United Auto Workers Union, the union could strike against one auto plant and have all the workers in that plant walk out and shut down the factory. In addition, the union could negotiate the same wages for all workers no matter who their employer. In this way, workers don't compete against each other (competing for the lowest labor costs gives employers a cost advantage, driving higher wage competitors out of business), since labor costs would be the same in all companies in a given industry.

As this review of labor history illustrates, workers have always sought to improve their lives by engaging in civic activities, using numerous strategies to achieve these — by forming political parties and through business, revolutionary and industrial unionism. Their inclusiveness regarding who they allowed to become members as well as the extent to which they engaged in the political and electoral process varied by the strategy they used.

Yet throughout this history, organized labor has had to contend with a hostile political and legal climate in the U.S. Today, neither the Knights of Labor nor the Philadelphia Mechanics Trade Union exist. The demise of the Knights of Labor occurred after eight policemen were killed by a bomb in Chicago during the 1886 strike for the eight-hour day and the state charged the leadership of this union with these murders, executing four of them (but later exonerated all eight because of a lack of evidence). The Workingmen's Party was a victim of hard economic times that eroded the resolve of workers who tried to improve their lives when there were others willing to take their jobs for less pay.

Both unions were also victims of the unforgiving laws in the U.S., which were slow to protect workers who wanted to organize into unions and failed to punish employers who used ruthless tactics to break unions. Unions could flourish only after the Wagner Act was passed in 1935. This law protected the right to organize workers into unions and established penalties for companies that tried to prevent organizing.

But subsequent changes in the law — namely, the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1955 — allowed for decertification of unions and weakened the ability of unions to organize workers. The result is that the number of workers organized into unions peaked at one-third in

1955 but has been declining ever since. This decline has accelerated in the last two decades, so that today only 12 percent of workers belong to unions. The decline of unions has been attributed to weak enforcement of the laws today and flaws in the labor laws that allow employers to prevent union organizing efforts (Freeman and Medoff 1984; Brofenbrenner 1994; Dannin and Wagar 2000). In contrast, in the government sector, union organizing and membership has increased, due to passage of federal and state laws beginning in the 1960s that have allowed for public sector unions to exist and to bargain collectively (Freeman 1986), and because the government sector has not resisted the unionization of workers. The post-war period also resulted in increased numbers of professional workers, and with these, a proliferation of employee associations for these workers.

The legacy of this relatively hostile legal and political history is that today, the only types of unions that exist are business and industrial unions, which merged in 1935 into the federation known as the AFL-CIO.<sup>iii</sup> The mechanism modern unions use to improve working conditions is to organize workers into local unions and to raise wages, and improve working conditions through collective bargaining with employers. Yet, modern unions have not turned their backs on other forms of civic engagement, as this essay will demonstrate. Historically as well as today, many unions have been involved in electoral politics as well as local community coalitions to improve the lives of working people.

## Asian Workers

Historically, Asians have faced the same difficulty of a hostile political and legal climate impeding their efforts to improve their wages and working conditions by organizing into unions. The consequence is that, like those of white workers, the vast majority of their strikes failed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But Asians also faced the additional obstacle of racism. Like other racial minorities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Asians were relegated to the jobs that no one else wanted — those that were the lowest-paying and that had the worst working conditions.<sup>iv</sup>

Moreover, throughout this history of trying to improve the lot of workers, organized labor largely neglected to organize Asian Americans and, at their worst, participated in excluding them from the more lucrative jobs. Shut out of labor unions and placed in the worst jobs in the U.S. — in agriculture, building railroads, and working in mines — Asians organized themselves into independent labor organizations that existed outside of the mainstream labor movement. Though stereotyped as unlikely to join labor unions and take militant action, in fact, Asians participated in and led numerous strikes.

The earliest strikes occurred while building the transcontinental railroads under dangerous and brutal conditions. In 1867, two thousand<sup>v</sup> Chinese railroad workers struck against the Central Pacific Railroad for higher wages, equal pay and hours (compared to white workers), an end to corporal punishment and for the ability to leave their jobs if they chose. Chinese workers also struck against the Houston and Texas Central Railroad in 1870 over their wages and failure of the company to comply with their contract. The Chinese workers lost both of these strikes due to brutal labor tactics by employers.

With low pay and oppressive working conditions, the agricultural sector experienced numerous organizing drives and strikes by Asian workers. In Hawaii, dissatisfaction over the exploitative conditions on the plantations, including segregated housing and jobs, low wages, and abusive overseers, led to many strikes. These included: 1,200 Japanese cane cutters and loaders in Wailua who struck in 1904 for higher wages; 7,000 Japanese workers who struck the major plantations in Oahu in 1909 for receiving lower wages than Portuguese and Puerto Rican workers; and 2,000 Filipino workers who struck in 1924 for higher pay, an eight-hour day, and better housing. Strikes by Japanese workers over abusive actions by overseers also occurred in Maui in 1904 and in Waipahu in 1906.

Perhaps the most notable strike on the islands was the six-month strike in 1919 when Japanese and Filipino workers banded their separate labor organizations together into a combined multiethnic labor organization, the Hawaii Laborers' Association. The union's 8,000 Japanese, Filipino, Puerto Rican and Spanish workers demanded higher pay and an eight-hour day. Although this strike, like all the



others on the islands, was lost by the workers, it is notable for uniting workers of many diverse nationalities.

Strikes in agriculture penetrated the mainland as well. As early as 1880, Chinese fruit pickers in Santa Clara, California, struck for higher wages (Takaki 1993). In 1903, Japanese and Mexican farm workers in Oxnard, California, joined together into the multiracial organization the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association, as 1,200 workers struck for higher wages. Like many strikes before the Wagner Act was passed in 1935, this strike was marred by violence. When strikers demonstrated in front of labor camps that housed strikebreakers, shots were fired, killing one Mexican worker and wounding two Japanese and two Mexican workers. Blame for the violence fell on the labor union, resulting in the jailing of the leaders of the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association (Chan 1991).

Violence was common during other strikes, as well. In 1933, 700 Filipino lettuce pickers struck in Salinas Valley, California. This union grew to 2,000 workers and joined the 1934 strike in Monterey with an AFL affiliate union, the Vegetable Packers Association. During this latter strike, labor leaders were arrested, two workers were shot, and the labor camp where hundreds of Filipino farm workers lived was burned to the ground (Chan 1991).

Notably, strikes by Asian workers were not limited to white owners or employers. In 1875, Chinese garment workers struck a Chinese sweatshop owner in San Francisco for higher wages. In Hawaii, 300 plantation workers struck in 1891 to protest a Chinese labor contractor who allegedly cheated them (Chan 1991). Asian workers, in other words, are similar to other workers: they organize for the same reasons other workers organize — for higher wages, better working conditions, fairness, and respect.

Despite their low pay, abusive working conditions, and demonstrated commitment to union organizing, Asian workers remained outside of organized labor. In part, this was because of the outright refusal of organized labor to include Asian workers. When the Hawaii Laborers' Association applied for membership into the AFL in 1920, the AFL never took up the matter (Chan 1991). When the Filipino lettuce pickers asked the AFL to form a union for them, the AFL refused, leaving the workers no choice but to form their own inde-

pendent union (Chan 1991). During the 1903 strike by the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association, the AFL mediated an agreement between workers and growers, after the murder and wounding of workers. But after the strike when the union applied for membership, the AFL stated that it would admit the union only if Chinese and Japanese workers were excluded from membership (it was willing to accept Mexican workers). The Mexican secretary of the union refused this condition and thus membership into the AFL, aptly stating:

Our Japanese here were the first to recognize the importance of cooperating and uniting in demanding a fair wage scale... We have fought and lived on very short rations with our Japanese brothers, and toiled with them in the fields... We would be false to them and to ourselves and to the cause of unionism if we now accepted privileges for ourselves which are not accorded to them (Chan 1991, 87).

Unions also ventured into the political realm to broaden their exclusion of Asians. The Seaman's International Union, an AFL affiliate, pressured Congress to forbid foreign sailors from working on U.S. ships and asked immigration officials to arrest and deport Chinese sailors (Chan 1991). Even the inclusive Knights of Labor, whose strategy was to organize every person in a community and included African Americans, excluded Chinese workers (the Chinese were the only Asians on the U.S. mainland at that time) along with liquor store owners, professional gamblers, stockbrokers, lawyers, bankers, and other "economic parasites." Moreover, the leadership of the Knights of Labor pushed for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and its extensions, excluding Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States. After its passage, the union leadership tried to extend this law to exclude Japanese and Koreans as well, but this attempt failed.

It was only in 1936 that the AFL accepted into its fold the Field Workers Union, a Mexican and Filipino union of farm workers (Chan 1991). Later, in 1940, the AFL admitted the Federated Agricultural Laborers Association, a Filipino union, after it successfully represented thousands of farm laborers in a series of strikes in central California (Chan 1991). By the 1960s, when Filipino and Mexican farm

worker organizations joined forces to form the United Farm Workers Union, the AFL admitted them as well.

There were rare exceptions to the exclusionary policies of labor unions. Generally, these exceptions were among CIO unions, which were more inclusive than others, given their strategy of organizing all workers. Both the canning industry and the National Maritime Union (NMU) admitted Asian workers into their CIO unions (Friday 1994; Chan 1991). The NMU in fact, was formed by workers who disagreed with the Seaman's International Union's exclusionary policies. The NMU invited Chinese workers to join a strike it called in 1936. Chinese sailors agreed to join the strike after the union pledged to address Chinese workers' concerns of equal treatment by race. The NMU also admitted black sailors into its union; its constitution was unusual in that it prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, creed, national origin, or political affiliation (Chan 1991).

Why were Asian workers anathema to organized labor? Of course, as historians argue, labor unions often refused to admit other ethnics, even other white ethnic workers (Saxton 1971). Additionally, labor unions reflected the social views of their time, which included racism. The labor unions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had segregated labor unions for African Americans, if they bothered to admit them at all.

Like other racial minorities during this time period, Asians were subject to anti-miscegenation laws, which forbade Asians to marry whites. These laws were removed from the books only in 1967 (Chan 1991). School segregation by race often prohibited Chinese, Japanese and Korean children from attending the white schools, instead relegating them to the "Oriental" or black schools. Residential segregation limited Asians to live within Chinatowns and other undesirable neighborhoods because of racially exclusive covenants or practices by realtors and landlords that restricted where Asians could live.

Being immigrants brought their own woes in addition to those based on race alone. Asians immigrants were subject to particular laws that taxed them, such as the Foreign Miner's Tax in 1850 and 1882 that subjected Chinese miners to pay \$3 per month in California. Other laws restricted Asians from owning or leasing land, beginning in 1913 with the Alien Land Law in California. Subsequent restrictive

land laws passed in California and in other states during the 1920s and 1930s restricted working as tenants on the land.

Moreover, Asians were singled out for exclusionary treatment, especially in U.S. immigration laws. These laws began with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which barred Chinese laborers from entering the U.S., the Gentleman's Agreement in 1907 that prevented the immigration of Japanese laborers, and the Immigration Act of 1924 which excluded "aliens ineligible for citizenship," thus effectively ending Japanese immigration.

Asian immigrants could be so targeted because they lacked political power. Because they were nonwhite and nonwhite immigrants were ineligible for U.S. citizenship, the Chinese were unable to become naturalized citizens and thus vote. This practice was upheld by two U.S. Supreme Court cases in 1922 (*Ozawa v. United States*) and 1923 (*United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*), which ruled that Asian immigrants were ineligible to become naturalized U.S. citizens (Chan 1991).

Thus labor leaders and their members reflected the views of a larger society that condoned these practices and restricted the rights and opportunities of Asian immigrants. It is no wonder that Asian workers were limited to jobs that were low-paying and least desirable. During the late nineteenth century, when the Chinese worked in manufacturing, they were hired in the lowest paying manufacturing jobs in urban areas. When they worked in the same industries as whites, they worked in the lowest paying occupations, and when they worked in the same occupations as white workers, they were paid less (Takaki 1993).

Anti-Chinese sentiments appeared in the late nineteenth century across the West. The Chinese, seen as a competitive threat by white miners, were robbed, attacked, run out of the lucrative gold mines and, in some cases, killed. In the farmlands across the West, Asian workers were run out of fields. Even the worst manufacturing jobs were too good for the Chinese. White workers, able to work in the West after completion of the transcontinental railroads, wanted these jobs for themselves during the trying years of the depression of the 1890s. They drove the Chinese out of these jobs through boycotting products made by Chinese labor in 1886 as well as through vi-

olence (Takaki 1993; Saxton 1971; Chan 1991).

Factories and stores that employed Chinese workers were burned; housing where the Chinese slept went up in flames. This began in the 1870s but found more frequency and organization during the 1880s and 1890s. Known as the “driving out,” residents of towns forcibly expelled the Chinese from towns across the West. They did this by beating, robbing, shooting, killing, lynching, and maiming the Chinese and loading them into trains and shipping them out of town. Arsonists burned buildings in Chinatowns; in some towns, entire Chinatowns were burned to the ground. Across the West, unarmed Chinese were murdered in cold blood.

Driven out of mining, factories, fields, railroads, and construction, the only jobs left for the Chinese were self-employment as store and restaurant owners and laundry workers, or manufacturing ethnic products that only their fellow ethnics bought, jobs that white workers did not want.

Asians who arrived in the early twentieth century were not immune from racial violence and circumscribed employment opportunities. In 1908, a mob robbed Asian Indians and drove them out of Live Oak, California, setting their camp on fire. In San Francisco, Japanese immigrants were physically attacked in 1906; in separate incidents that year, still others were stoned — a famous Japanese seismologist was one of these fatal victims. In 1921, Japanese immigrants were forced to leave Turlock, California, or be lynched if they refused or returned. Korean farm laborers were similarly threatened with violence if they worked the orchards in Hemet, California, in 1913, as were Filipino workers, who were driven out of Washington’s Yakima Valley in 1928. In 1930, Filipino farm workers were attacked by a mob of 400 whites in Palm Beach, who killed two Filipino workers and beat up dozens more (Chan 1991).

With few exceptions (see Friday 1994), Asians were not organized into unions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was in part because of union leadership, but also in part because they did not work in industries that were unionized, due to employers, co-workers and a society that wouldn’t allow them to work in other, more lucrative types of employment. This reflected racially prevalent attitudes and practices that segregated minority

workers in the lowest paid jobs that no one else wanted and enforced job, educational and residential segregation through law and violence.

Fortunately, times have changed. Racially segregated labor unions became illegal after passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Changes in immigration priorities after the 1965 Immigration Act allowed many more Asians to immigrate to the United States as refugees, skilled workers who are in short supply, or as family members uniting with those living here. The result was a rapid increase of Asian workers to the United States, so much so that today, most Asians in the U.S. are immigrants (Ong et al. 1994). These immigrants are diverse culturally and historically, coming from countries like South Korea and the Philippines, in which labor unions were free and strong, and others, in which labor unions were mere puppets of the state or of employers.

One consequence of the 1965 immigration law is that Asian immigrants are bimodal. Those reuniting with family or entering the U.S. as refugees often have relatively low levels of English language abilities and formal educations, such as those from Southeast Asian countries. These immigrants work in lower paid industries, such as in garment, restaurant, hotel and personal service. The immigrants that fill occupations where there exist labor shortages, however, such as nurses from the Philippines and engineers and information technology professionals from India, have relatively high levels of formal educations, English language abilities and technical skills and earn relatively high wages (Ong et al. 1994; Kim and Mar 2007).

The diversity of Asian workers today — by skill level, English language ability, country of origin, and experiences with unions in their ancestral countries — have numerous implications when organizing Asians into unions, as the next section explains.

## **Labor Unions, APALA, Civic Participation and Asians Today**

Today, 11 percent of Asian workers belong to labor unions (for comparison, 12 percent of all workers belong to labor unions; Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008). With the growth of Asian immigrants into the U.S., unions changed their views and tactics during the late twen-

tieth century. Many labor unions began to understand that it was in their best interests to include Asian workers in their unions, since including them was better than competing against their lower wages if they remained unorganized. Lower cost and unorganized workers produce lower priced products and services that put unionized employers at a competitive disadvantage. Perhaps the greatest change was that Asians were being successfully organized into labor unions in garment, hotel, restaurant, and meatpacking industries, often by Asian organizers, and that Asian organizers were needed in order to communicate to workers in their own language and to understand the nuances of the many Asian cultures.

With unions needing Asians to organize workers, and the unions' promises of higher pay, greater benefits and protections in the workplace for Asians, a marriage of mutual benefit was obvious to both Asians and unions.<sup>vi</sup> This was formalized in 1992, when the AFL-CIO formed the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA).

The purpose of this organization is two-fold: 1) To train new organizers to organize Asians into labor unions and assist labor unions during organizing campaigns of Asian workers, and 2) To mobilize Asian voters to increase Asian American participation in the political process.

As a result of APALA's training efforts, there is a new generation of people who have been trained and recruited into unions, more union organizing campaigns involving Asian Americans, and an expanded capacity of unions to reach out to Asian American workers (Wong 2007). Consequently, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Asians who have been organized. Across the nation, 20,000 Asian American workers have been organized into unions within the last five years (Wong 2007).

An example can be seen in APALA's organizing efforts in Los Angeles' health care industry, which employs many Asian workers. The union density increased from six to 65 percent in health care as a result of the work of many APA organizers, some who were recruited through APALA's efforts. In Los Angeles, 74,000 workers joined the Long Term Care Union of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in 1999 (Wong 2007). In another example, APALA helped mo-

bilize the Filipino community to support the San Francisco Airport workers' unionization campaign, 90 percent of who were Filipino (Caoile 2007).

Labor took notice. "There was a sense from labor unions that Asians are invisible and not interested in organizing," May Chen, International Vice President of UNITE/HERE and Manager of Local 23-25 in New York City, explains. "But the many Asian organizers who have participated in the labor movement and the successful campaigns proved them wrong. It showed that Asians were interested in organizing and were good at it" (Chen 2007)

APALA also mobilizes voters to increase Asian American participation in the political process. As Chen describes, "Political activism and political education are the nuts and bolts of a union." Unions register voters in workplaces and in communities, and teach members who their representatives are and how to visit and lobby them. They educate their members about issues pressing to communities, such as immigration reform, help shape talking points about these issues, and send their members to lobby state and local politicians. These union members then take these skills back to their communities, teaching others about the issues and how they can effect political change (Chen 2007).

During elections, APALA is active in voter education and mobilization efforts, including this current national election. Currently, APALA is training its members for the national election, including voter registration, voter education, and get out the vote efforts (Wong 2007). During the 2006 election, APALA worked with community groups on political mobilization campaigns, including one in Nevada, since many Asians in Las Vegas work in the gaming industry. They helped register Asians to vote and helped with voter protection, in terms of having access to ballots in their language and access to the polls. They had a phone bank in many different Asian languages, registered and mobilized numerous Asians to vote, and ran classes on what to do at the polls and citizens' rights at the polls. The result was that the Asian Pacific American vote spiked in Nevada (Somma 2007).

Part of APALA's ongoing political education efforts include a Congressional Voter Guide that describes issues that affect Asian Pa-



cific Americans, such as immigration rights, civil rights, and workers' rights. It also states APALA's position on these issues and how Senate and House Congressional Representatives voted — whether with or against APALA. Although they don't tell voters how to vote, by explaining the bills that have come before Congress and how Congressional Representatives voted, APALA informs the Asian Pacific American community about whether or not their representatives are voting for their interests (Caoile 2007; Somma 2007). Educating voters about how Congressional leaders stand on issues pertinent to Asian workers has made a difference. As Caoile states, "Harry Reid won by only a few thousand votes in the last election. Those are our votes; they made a difference. In California, Asian Pacific Americans play a major role, providing a swing vote."

Politicians have noticed. "Now when we ask for a meeting, Congressional leaders meet with us. It took time to organize the community, to tell the community that you should have a voice. Now that we have mobilized Asian Pacific Americans and have the numbers in our organization, we do have a voice and political clout," says Caoile. An example of the new political clout of Asian Pacific Americans occurred during 2006. Caoile explained that "as the voter guide was going to press, there was one issue that one member of Congress hadn't decided on. We didn't know how he was going to vote. We called his office and said we were going to put him down as voting against us. He changed his vote because of this and voted with us!"

APALA is also advancing legislative issues pertinent to Asian Americans, such as immigration and Asian American workers' rights. It has worked on campaigns to defeat anti-immigrant and anti-civil rights bills in Congress and referendums in California, and to support bills in Congress that strengthen workers' rights. It has mobilized workers for immigration reform and helped elect to the California State Assembly Ted Lieu, who is sympathetic to labor and Asian Pacific Americans' interests (Caoile 2007). In California and Washington, APALA members hold elected office, and many Asian legislators, national and statewide, come to APALA for assistance. APALA works with them on voter mobilization and protection (Somma 2007).

"Overall, the labor movement is an activist force," Kent Wong

states. "Bringing Asians into the labor movement enhances their participation on various fronts." This is because many unions also are involved in larger issues of concern to their members, such as economic and social justice issues, and with Asian and Hispanic workers, immigrant issues as well. In Los Angeles, labor unions and their members have been active on immigrant workers' rights. The culmination of these efforts occurred on May 1, 2006, when Los Angeles held a demonstration for workers' and immigrant rights, attracting the largest turnout for a "May Day" demonstration in U.S. history (Wong 2007).

Maria Somma, Health Care Organizing Coordinator of the United Steel Workers, says that when she organizes, she explicitly involves the union in pertinent community issues, such as education, crime, tax policy and access to health care. Even without a unionization drive, union members often work with community activists around local social and economic justice issues. Often ad hoc alliances are created among community organizations, including faith based organizations, and labor members work on specific local community issues. In Washington Heights, a Dominican neighborhood in New York City, there was medical maltreatment resulting from the lack of translators in the hospitals. Although the city already had a language access law, unions and community organizations successfully pressured the city to enforce it. In other areas of New York, unions and community groups helped launch campaigns to build playgrounds in immigrant communities. In Queens, unions and community organizations campaigned to include Muslim holidays in school schedules. Most recently, unions and community organizations joined together to press the state of New York to allow driver's licenses for illegal immigrants (Chen 2007).

"Community and labor are the same," concludes Caoile. "Labor plays an important role in communities." Once Asians become politically active, they participate in other community activities, such as becoming school board members or getting involved in other community issues (Caoile 2007; Chen 2007; Quan 2004). There appears to be a spill-over effect from union activities to broader community involvement (Chen 2007). "Union members see how being involved in the community is similar to protecting workplace rights," says

Somma. "The biggest problem with immigrants is lack of knowledge regarding their rights and the laws. But if you teach them that they can have an impact on their living and working conditions, if you mobilize and educate them, you may get them involved in voting, supporting a union drive, or protesting English Only bills."

Katie Quan, former International Vice President of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) has witnessed many union members undertaking personal transformations in their lives as a result of organizing. By standing up to their employers and organizing with fellow workers in the community, workers realize that they can change the conditions of their livelihoods through working together. Union experience gives them self-confidence as well as imparts knowledge, skills (such as writing press releases and speaking to the media), and leadership abilities to challenge and improve social and economic injustices. They then bring these skills back to their communities to improve a variety of social problems. "They learn how to do things they never envisioned they'd do before," Quan says. As Quan explains, many garment workers move up the ranks in the labor movement. Others take the skills they learned and become active in their community around other issues, such as police brutality and gentrification. Thus the skills learned while working with unions gives them a sense of personal empowerment that transforms them, so that they become community leaders around other issues as a result (Quan 2004; Kim 2005).

## **Challenges in Organizing Asians**

### **U.S. Labor Law**

Many of the challenges to organizing Asians are the same ones that face many other workers: the laws in the United States are so weak that it is easy for employers to prevent union organizing (Brofenbrenner 1994). Employers often fire workers who are sympathetic to the union; thus when it comes time to vote for the union, many people who would have voted for the union are no longer employed (Freeman and Medoff 1984). If they don't fire these workers, employers can transfer them to the worst jobs or otherwise make their

working conditions less desirable so that these workers will quit (Levitt 1993). Employers can also intimidate workers, stating that they will lose their jobs if a union is elected. Although these activities are illegal, the fines employers face are low and it takes years for unfair labor practice charges to make their way to hearings; by then the union election has long been held, usually with the union losing and the employer paying a small fine.

These activities by employers erode the support unions have from workers. When the most visible union supporters are being fired, laid off or are quitting from their harassment, fewer union supporters remain. Those remaining workers who support the union would be rightfully afraid of losing their job when they see the most visible supporters fired or harassed. The result is that workers are less likely to vocally support the union, become active in the unionization drive, or vote for the union.

Such was the case of organizing workers in the largest Chinese newspaper in Los Angeles, the Chinese Daily News. The workers voted for the union, but management undertook a five-year battle with the workers, firing many of the pro-union workers, harassing some of the pro-union workers that remained, and stalling contract negotiations (Wong 2007). The tactics worked. A second union election was held, in which the union was defeated. Workers were too afraid to vote for the union a second time. Eventually, the illegal practices of management were heard in court, and workers received some compensation, but it was too late. The newspaper remains non-union (Wong 2007). Because unfair labor practices are heard many years later and the fines and back pay workers receive are so meager, corporations lack any strong disincentives to break the law.

## Cultural Sensitivity

In addition to these challenges, any good union organizer tailors a given campaign to fit the needs and background of its members. Among Asian immigrants, English is not their first language and their cultural identity (at least during the first generation) often remains with their home country. These immigrants have assumptions and biases about unions rooted in their experiences in their

home countries, so organizers often need to educate these workers about unions in the U.S., explaining that the union will not be controlled by the company or by the government, that it would truly be independent, and that members would have a say about union activities and their leadership (Somma 2007; Chen 2007).

For Asian immigrant workers, having someone who speaks their language and comes from their culture (or at least understands it) is critical (Somma 2007; Chen 2007). Many of the organizers emphasized this point:

You have to understand the culture, talk to the workers, learn their ethnicity, speak their language, signal that you understand who they are. You have to have Asian organizers, folks who look like the workers, so that if someone looks like the workers and understands them, Asians figure the union is okay if this Asian believes in it. Workers are more trusting if there is an Asian organizer and if the organizer understands their cultural background (Chen 2007; Caoile 2007).

As Chen explains, the general approach to organizing Asians is similar to any group: talk to workers, understand their assumptions about unions, and communicate what the union will do for them. This involves identifying the key issues for workers and including these in the organizing campaign. Organizers culturally attuned to the workers will most likely understand the important issues for these workers and thus how to approach them. For Asian immigrants, addressing their needs for health care benefits and other workplace benefits is often important, as well as communicating to workers that with a union they would have recourse for any problems that arise, including problems of discrimination. Having a place to go where they can bring their problems is critical and often helps win them over to the union side. For U.S.-born Asian workers, often education and health benefits are more important than to other workers (Chen 2007).

Also important to any union campaign is knowing the leaders in the community, understanding the power structure of the community, and obtaining the approval of these people and organizations.

This is also best done by someone who speaks the language and comes from those communities (Somma 2007). Somma recalls, "We were organizing technical employees among which were many (about 15%) Filipinos. There were two to three key Asian leaders. Once you got them, you got the majority [of workers] through the leaders in the worksite. It's like going to the elders; you have to find the leaders, understand the power structure. Once you have [their support], you have the rest of the workers."

Unions that heed this advice will succeed; those that don't, fail.

An organizing drive from the United Auto Workers illustrates this. Caoile said, "When they first started to organize casino workers in Atlantic City, they did fliers, letters. The UAW said that the Asians didn't respond." The lead organizer was Asian but didn't speak the language. So they called Caoile for advice on how to reach these workers (Caoile 2007; Somma 2007).

APALA sent in Chinese speakers and mailed letters to all the workers in their native language, describing APALA, what unions were, what their legal rights were, and how unions could improve their workplaces (Somma 2007). The union took out radio ads on the local Chinese radio station, as well as ads in ethnic papers to describe the organizing drive (Somma 2007; Caoile 2007). Caoile told the union which organizations they should call to get their support, who the leaders were in the community, the restaurants workers frequented, and where the workers lived and shopped, so that organizers could visit these places to talk to workers. The UAW followed this advice, putting ads in ethnic papers and translating the material into different languages. The first time they had a union election, they lost. The second time, after following this advice, they won. They then started organizing in Connecticut. Because they knew what to do this time, Caoile says, they won.

As Quan emphasizes, "In organizing people of color, it's important to understand the social networks and the fabric of the particular ethnic or racial community. Who are the important players in the community? Who can you ally with to build a platform? You can't just pass out leaflets or you'd be viewed as an outsider with no credibility. Instead, you have to find out what the key organizations and networks are. In the Chinese community, the media is impor-

tant. The Chinese read one to two newspapers a day. They take the newspapers' word as the truth; if the newspaper says something is so, they believe it is right. So in organizing these workers, important matters must appear in a newspaper, making media campaigns important in organizing these workers."

Organizational affiliation is also important, Quan states. "You need to gain the support of organizations that are respected in the community. With the Chinese community, these were clubs and associations, of which there are many. Joining community organizations and having them as sponsors was important to lending credibility towards your issues. For Koreans, churches were the important institutions to involve."

In 1989, Quan was the head of organizing garment workers in San Francisco. "All of the targeted shops were comprised of Chinese immigrants. To establish roots and credibility in the Chinese community, we established a worker center in Chinatown. It was a bold move for unions to come to Chinatown. People told me that the unionization drive would never work, that the conservative elements in the Chinese community would oppose the unionization drive and break the windows of the center."

For the opening of the center, Quan sent out invitations on red cardboard. She had visited all of the Chinese associations and invited the leaders to come to the opening ceremony. But a week before the opening, her boss questioned her, telling her that she was doing everything wrong — that she should use white paper for the invitations, for example. "I told him, 'No, it had to be on red paper,'" Quan says, knowing the cultural significance of the color red to the Chinese community.

The opening was a huge success. "The mayor came, the leaders came, there was a lion's dance. The place was packed full of Chinese workers. The center was welcomed, and the members were thrilled. They felt that the union was sinking roots into the community and that it knew how to do things right." (Quan 2004) Knowing the social fabric of the Chinese community and respecting the culture was key to success.

## Internal Union Dynamics

Another challenge of organizing Asian workers is the composition of the labor movement, which lacks diversity. Most of the leaders in labor remain white men who hold the power in the labor movement and make the decisions (Wong 2007). Asians speak of the existence of double standards and a glass ceiling in unions. As Quan explains, "You're ghettoized. There is a glass ceiling. From my own life, I spoke to the head of my union and told him I wanted to become management, which meant heading a local. He asked, "Do you speak Spanish?" I didn't speak Spanish, but that didn't stop the Jewish men from heading local unions and it hadn't stopped him. I was viewed as ripe for only Chinese speaking people." Although Quan believes this is changing a bit, her observations of other Asian organizers is that "you tend to stay in the Asian community." "I applied for regional director position in LA, where most of the workers were Latino," she said. "I had more seniority and was more skilled than the other applicants, but someone else who was not Asian was chosen. I was told that I should stay in Northern California in the Asian population. If I had been white and male I would have had different experiences; I'd have gone farther quicker."

## Perceptions of Asians

Perhaps the greatest challenge, however, is one of perception. Many people view Asians as apolitical. Currently, Asians are less likely to participate in the political process (see Chapter 1 by Ong and Scott). But this is changing. As Caoile states, "Asians may have been complacent. At one time a lot of Asian Pacific Americans didn't get involved in electoral politics. But now they know that you need to be involved in electoral politics, that the political process affects the decisions about your health care, the schools your kids attend. Asians are engaged in political action now."

Because two-thirds of Asians are immigrants, they may be less participatory in the electoral system. This status also may make them more afraid of organizing into a union because they have so much more to lose. As Caoile explains, "They have families back home looking to them for survival — they are supporting an entire family.



In New Jersey, there are a lot of Filipina nurses. For most, it's their first job. They work the worst shifts — the night shift, the holiday shift. During an organization drive, they said they couldn't join the union or they'd get fired and their entire family wouldn't eat back home."

"But if an Asian Pacific American talks to them outside of the workplace and educates workers, and tells them they can't be fired from an organization drive, they get stronger. They talk to each other, find out they're all in the same boat, that they all get the holiday shifts. They begin to see their problems not as individual but collective ones, and realize that the solution is a collective one as well. They think, maybe we do have a voice. They begin to complain, fear is no longer part of them. They ask why they get the worst shifts, and then they see a change — they're treated better because they know their rights and can't be forced to work the worst shifts." (Caoile 2007)

Somma agrees. "Immigrants are hard to organize because of language, culture, and because they have more to lose. It's not just their job but their whole family; a lot is on the line. In my personal experience in organizing nurses, once you show that the union is a valid and legal vehicle, that the union can't harm you, and that there is power in the collective, workers join the union."

The rapid increase of immigrant workers in the United States is a reason unions need to contend with them. As Somma states, immigrants are the fastest-growing sector in union membership. Indeed, the proportion of union members who are immigrants has increased from 9 to 11 percent from 1996 to 2004, and the number of immigrants in the U.S. increased 48% in the United States between 1996 and 2004 (Migration Policy Institute 2004). Thus immigrants are a growing population among union members because of the increased number of immigrant workers in the United States.

As these illustrations show and as Wong emphasizes, "Asians can be political. They are political. Whether activated through community work or labor unions, the younger Asian Americans are having an impact in politics including the electoral arena."

For this reason, politicians are no longer ignoring them.

## The Future of Labor Unions as a Vehicle for Civic Engagement

### The Future for Asians

"Our time has come," says Caoile, "we are a growing population." Indeed, the future for organizing Asians is bright, since Asians are concentrated in many areas that are growing, including health care, hospitals, service industries and education (Caoile 2007; Somma 2007; Wong 2007). These are sectors that unions have targeted for organizing drives. As Caoile states, SEIU and AFSCME are organizing in these areas. Asians also work in many occupations that have been targeted for organizing, including post-secondary teachers, registered nurses, lab technicians, gaming service workers, and airport concession and Hudson News stands in airports (APALA nd; Chen 2007). In addition, Asians disproportionately work in the public and health care sectors, where there are higher unionization rates than in other industries (Wong 2007). The result is that Asians are the fastest growing ethnic group to join unions (Somma 2007).

Asians are also concentrated in geographic locations that are amenable to unions. Asians are concentrated in urban areas where union density is significant, Wong states. "For example, the largest union density is in Hawaii. Hawaii has very progressive social policies. It is the only state with universal health care. There is a history of having progressive social legislation and legislators. Asians hold political office in Hawaii, they are involved in political activities and in labor unions. Labor has a link with communities and has influence in Hawaii." Other areas where Asians are concentrated include New York, California and Massachusetts, which also have high union densities.

According to Somma, the AFL-CIO is examining organizing professional workers, including registered nurses, health care workers, technicians, respiratory therapists, radiologists, laboratory professionals, IT occupations (where the Communications Workers of America are organizing), and educators, since all of these occupations are growing. The AFL-CIO is also forming relationships with pro-

fessional organizations that have a large number of Asian workers, such as accountants and pharmacists, exploring whether or not collective bargaining can advance these professions.

If immigration laws change so that higher educated immigrants are preferred over less skilled immigrants, these professional organizations will be critical to protecting Asian workers. But even without changes in the immigration laws, higher educated Asians in public service, education, and medicine will continue to find themselves courted by unions. Because Asians work in both high- and low-paid jobs that are unionized, Asians will continue to play a role in unionization efforts.

## Replenishing Organizers

Organizing is difficult work. It involves travel and working around the clock during a campaign, including many nights and weekends. With so much at stake — lower profits for employers, possible lost jobs for workers who can be illegally fired when they organize — the work can be highly confrontational and emotionally taxing. The result for many organizers is burnout. After a few years of this lifestyle, many organizers move on to other jobs. This has been no different among Asian organizers. As Chen explains, this pattern is exacerbated by the fact that the Organizing Institute at the AFL-CIO has focused exclusively on training college graduates to be organizers. These college graduates have families that expected their sons and daughters to go into law or medicine, but instead they became organizers. Many of these young college graduates consequently organize for five to ten years and then go to law school (Chen 2007).

Certainly, unions benefited from the talents of these young organizers during their stints as organizers, and many do stay in the labor movement, including many stars such as Norman Yen, a Brown graduate, who is currently running an affiliate union in Texas.

But as May Chen suggests, part of the solution may be in training rank and file workers to become organizers, as well as college graduates. “There are a lot of Chinese, Filipino, and Vietnamese workers working in hotels. These workers won’t go to law school or

medical school. They really appreciate what the union did for their families, that it raised wages, allowed their kids to get good educations and was their entrée into the middle class. We need to get these people involved in organizing, because once you do, they do an amazing job.”

Chen explains that when UNITE HERE organized a TJ MAXX in Pennsylvania, she sent some rank and file activists to help organize it. “They got along instantly with the workers there because they were similar to them. They were enthusiastic about the union, and it showed. It won over workers; they won the trust of workers quickly. They were hard workers and they did a great job.”

## The Future for Unions

While Asians are poised to become union members and become active in civic engagement, the future for labor unions, without changes in the law, is more problematic. Unionization rates have fallen from one-third percent to only 12 percent of workers today. Much of this decline is because of management’s resistance to unions and use of illegal tactics, such as those used by the Chinese Daily News, to prevent unions from organizing workers (Brofenbrenner 1994; Freeman and Medoff 1984).

Only with additional legislation can these problems cede. Such legislation would allow unions to file injunctions against employers, allow financial penalties against employers for threats, intimidation, lies, distortion, and plant closings as a result of union campaigns, and increase penalties for employers who break the law. Currently, fines are so low that it is economically worthwhile to break the laws, since doing so incurs a small cost and saves much more by keeping out a union. In addition, reducing the time between filing unfair labor practices and receiving a judgment from the National Labor Relations Board would benefit workers. Finally, allowing unions to be officially recognized after a majority of workers sign cards stating their desire to have a union, which is the case in Canada, would also prevent abusive employer practices and aid organizing efforts (Brofenbrenner 1994).

Another challenge is urging unions to organize workers. Many

national unions have chosen not to undertake such expensive, difficult campaigns (Wong 2007). Or they organize shop by shop, which is why they lose, Wong says. What unions need is strategic organizing — analyzing industries to see which are growing and where unions can win elections, having a comprehensive organizing campaign, with industry-wide targets, committing the necessary resources, involving the community, conducting corporate research, and having an effective media campaign. These are all elements of successful organizing campaigns.

## Conclusion

Historically, few Asians belonged to unions, reflecting a society that excluded, or at best, ignored, Asian workers. But with changes in attitudes about race, and with APALA and unions reaching out to organize Asian Pacific Americans, race is no longer a barrier. Instead, today, the barriers to unionizing Asian workers — employer resistance and weak national laws — are those that confront all workers. Thus Asians hold a common agenda with other workers, and civic participation across racial lines will further the cause of Asians, as well as all workers.

Today, Asians are organizing Asian workers into labor unions. The very activity of organizing into unions often transforms and empowers workers when they experience that by working together they can change the conditions of their lives. Consequently, unionized workers use their newfound tools of collective action to participate broadly in their local community and in the larger society, and in doing so, improve their schools, neighborhoods, and nation.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> This review of labor history is based upon Lee Balliet (1987).
- <sup>ii</sup> It changed its name in 1936.
- <sup>iii</sup> Recently, however, some unions, including the Service Employees International Union and the Teamsters, have splintered off from the AFL-CIO but continue to follow either the industrial or business unionism model.
- <sup>iv</sup> This review of the history of Asian workers and unions is based on Takaki (1993) and Chan (1991).

- v According to Chan (1991), two thousand struck; according to Takaki (1993), it was five thousand.
- vi Among full-time wage and salary workers, the median usual weekly earnings for union members was \$863; for non-union members it was \$663 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008; see also Freeman and Medoff, 1984, for the union wage premium).