

Asian Immigrant Women Workers and the Micro-Politics of Social Movement Practice



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MUJERES UNIDAS Y ACTIVAS



View **English**

Ver **Español**

Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA) is a grassroots organization of Latina immigrant women with a double mission of promoting personal transformation and building community power for social and economic justice.

Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA) es un grupo de base de mujeres latinas inmigrantes con la doble misión de promover la transformación personal y fomentar el poder comunitario para lograr la justicia social y económica.

Immigrant Worker Centers

- AIWA, established in 1983, as ethnic community-based worker organization
- Chinese and Korean immigrant women workers in garment, electronics, hotel, food services, homecare and other low-paid, precarious jobs
- Double exclusion: community and unions
- Worker centers as “hybrid organizations” (Janice Fine)
- “Intersectional optic on power”: women, racialized immigrants, household, workers



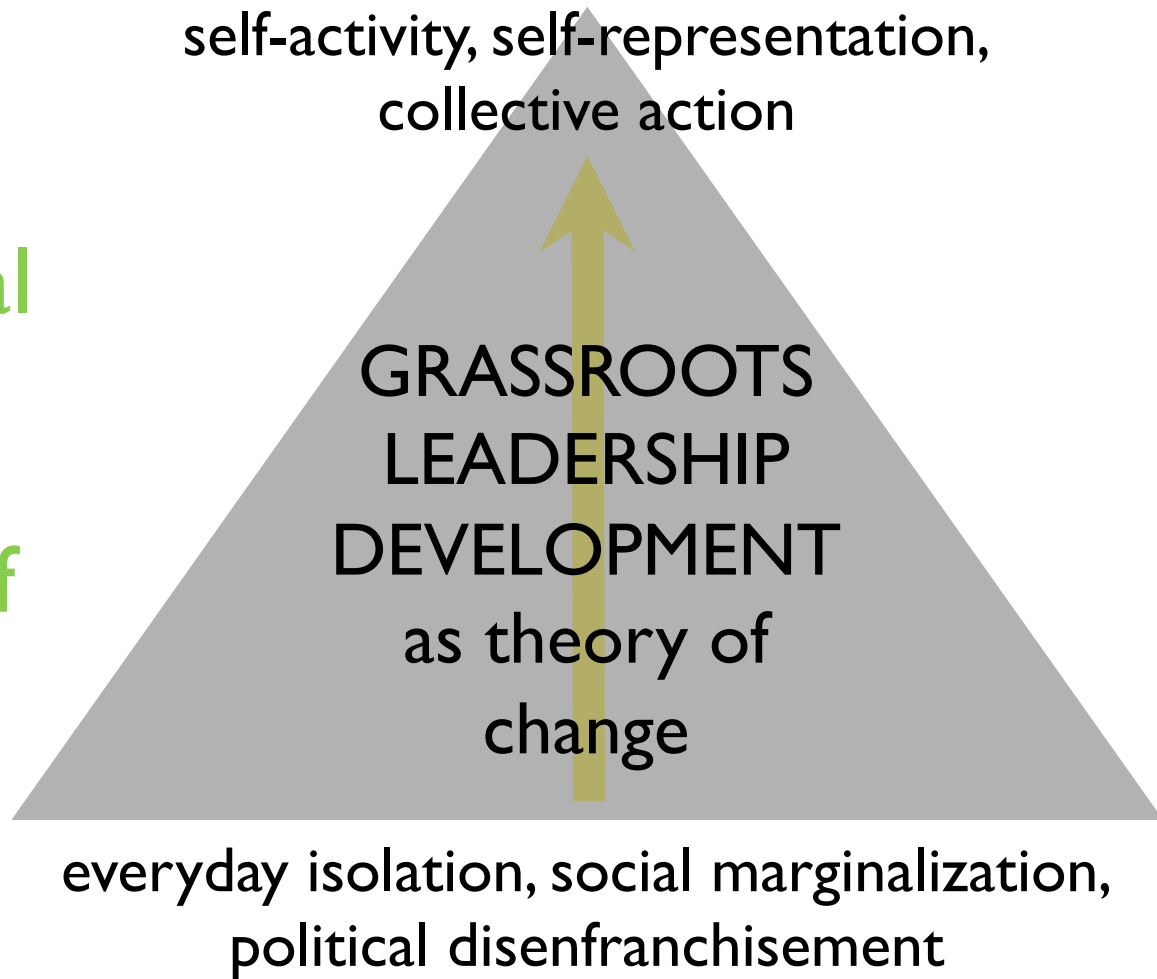


“Once I learned that English [can be used] as a tool to oppress us, I had to figure out where the way out lies. I had to find my own way out.”

Hai Yan, AIWA leader

Why *intersectional* optic on power?

Community
Transformational
Organizing
Strategy as
“methodology of
the oppressed”



Micropolitics of social movements

- SM theorizing tends to focus on organizational resources, political opportunities, & mobilizing frames
- Need to theorize the ***micropolitics***: work of social movement organizations for promoting collective political agency and resistance, esp. for marginalized and disenfranchised
- Pragmatic, systematic, integrated, transparent approach that includes mix of strategies: popular education, peer-to-peer training, proactive campaigns, grassroots expertise

About the collaboration

- Document and analyze AIWA' s approach to grassroots community organizing over three decades
 - Evaluation: what was worked, what has not and why
 - Reflexive: about organizational sustainability
 - Action: “Time for a paradigm shift” (Young Shin)
 - My history as activist-scholar
 - Reflexivity, accountability, workplan, timeline

Focus
groups (17)
with AIWA
members
(50)

In-depth
interviews
(15) with
staff and
allies

Participator
y Action
Research
(2007-2012)

Surveys (181) Archival CTOS membership database

- **Joint presentations and publications**

- Chun, Jennifer, George Lipsitz and Young Shin. 2013. “Intersectionality as a Social Movement Strategy: Asian Immigrant Women Advocates.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38(4): 917-40
- Chun, Jennifer, George Lipsitz and Young Shin . 2010. “AIWA Takes Stock of Itself: Immigrant Workers at the Center of Social Change,” *KALFOU: Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies*, Inaugural Issue: 127-132
- Chun, Jennifer Jihye , Young Shin and George Lipsitz. 2013. “Immigrant Women Workers at the Center of Social Change: Asian Immigrant Women Advocates,” pp. 207-231. In *Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age*, eds. Anna Romina Guevarra, Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, Grace Chang, and Maura Toro-Morn. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

- **New collaborators: George Lipsitz and Cynthia Cranford**

- Homecare: How to organize same workers in new sector and in different institutional conditions?

How and why did AIWA come to
prioritize the importance of grassroots
leadership development in its
organizational practice?



Worker outreach Popular education

From labour rights to community
organizing: building a membership base

Justice for Garment Workers' Campaign (1992-1996)



Pickets demand payment from Jessica McClintock for wages not paid by a subcontractor.

Jessica McClintock picketed for wages owed by subcontractor

Workers didn't get paid by bankrupt sewing factory

By Steven A. Chis
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

Seeking compensation for the back wages they are owed after their sewing factory folded, seamstresses and their supporters held a rally in front of garment manufacturer Jessica McClintock's San Francisco headquarters.

When the Oakland-based Lucky Sewing Co., which sewed clothes for Jessica McClintock Inc. and other manufacturers, went bankrupt in May, it still owed 12 workers about \$115,000 in wages. The workers last week asked that McClintock compensate them about \$2,000 for the time and labor it took to sew her product.

McClintock refused, saying it was "unfair and totally unjustified" for them to single her out. McClintock, who paid Lucky for the

clothes, said that her company had ceased doing business with Lucky more than a year before it went bankrupt.

At McClintock's headquarters at 1400 16th St. on Tuesday, about 200 people carrying banners and waving red flags called on the San Francisco manufacturer to meet its social responsibility.

"Jessica McClintock may be able to hide behind their system of subcontracting which created the sweatshops that have plagued many, many women since the turn of the century, but she cannot hide from one single truth — these garment workers sewed her fancy, romantic dresses," said Young Shin, executive director of Asian Immigrant Women's Advocates, an Oakland-based immigrant rights group assisting the seamstresses. "Jessica McClintock sold them and made a profit."

More rallies are planned this month in San Francisco and around the country as part of a national campaign to improve in-

dustry wages and working conditions, said organizers.

In a letter to The Examiner published Monday, McClintock said her company "has demonstrated its commitment and concern that employees of its contractors be treated fairly and paid in accordance with the law long before it became fashionable for organizations such as Asian Immigrant Women's Advocates to champion this cause."

She also said her company refuses to do business with contractors charged with labor violations.

Other supporters of the seamstresses included Katie Quan, an International Ladies' Garment Workers Union manager, who said the Lucky incident represented "just the tip of the iceberg as far as what happens to workers in sweatshops."

"Across the Bay Area," Quan said, "there are more than 20,000 garment workers whose wages are not being paid, whose overtime pay is not being paid."

19TH CENTURY CLOTHES...AND
SWEATSHOP CONDITIONS TO MATCH...

JESSICA MCCLINTOCK SAYS:

LET THEM EAT LACE.



It's RINGS TO RICHES FOR JESSICA MCCLINTOCK. BUT THE WOMEN WHO SEW IN THE SWEATSHOPS HAVE STILL NOT BEEN PAID. YOU CAN HELP.

"I specialize in the concept of romanticism," says top San Francisco businesswoman Jessica McClintock. "You come to me for very romantic clothes."

Well, we have to distinguish you, but here are the very romantic details.

The dress you buy off the rack for \$175 costs the store half that from Jessica McClintock or any other "romantic" designer.

Of the wholesale price, half goes to the romantic Ms. McClintock. The other \$40 goes to a national contractor who made the dress in a locked-out storefront where in the Bay Area.

We owe? Maybe \$20 for the dress. And all of \$5 for the woman who sewed it.

If she gets paid anything at all.

Jessica McClintock, Inc., is the 17th largest apparel company in San Francisco, taking in \$145 million last year. And she just opened a new store in Robin Drive.

she knows her seamstresses. But in McClintock's daily business, designer prototyping, she's reporting the deplorable hard work of women who usually have no time to think about such things — women who don't even know that dresses they get \$5 a piece to make carry \$175 price tags downtown.

No, Jessica McClintock can't be paid better. But she can be paid more. After all, she's kept the profits. And her is to what's right. And the women know it.

Don't let the 19th century clothes...and sweatshop conditions to match... continue. Help the women who sew in the sweatshops. Write to Jessica McClintock, Inc., 1400 16th St., San Francisco, CA 94103. Tell her you want to see the women who sew in the sweatshops paid. Tell her you want to see the women who sew in the sweatshops paid. Tell her you want to see the women who sew in the sweatshops paid.

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Within movement:
**participation
gap**

AIWA' s CTOS model

Beyond defensive campaigns and public mobilizations (and heroism of few)

Post-campaign life: about developing and sustaining grassroots leaders through individual and organizational transformation

“...a more complex equality in which different skills, talents, and interests are seen as equally valuable” (Polletta 2002)

AIWA Leadership Chart & CTOS

(Community Transformational Organizing Strategy)

CTOS

7

CTOS

6

CTOS

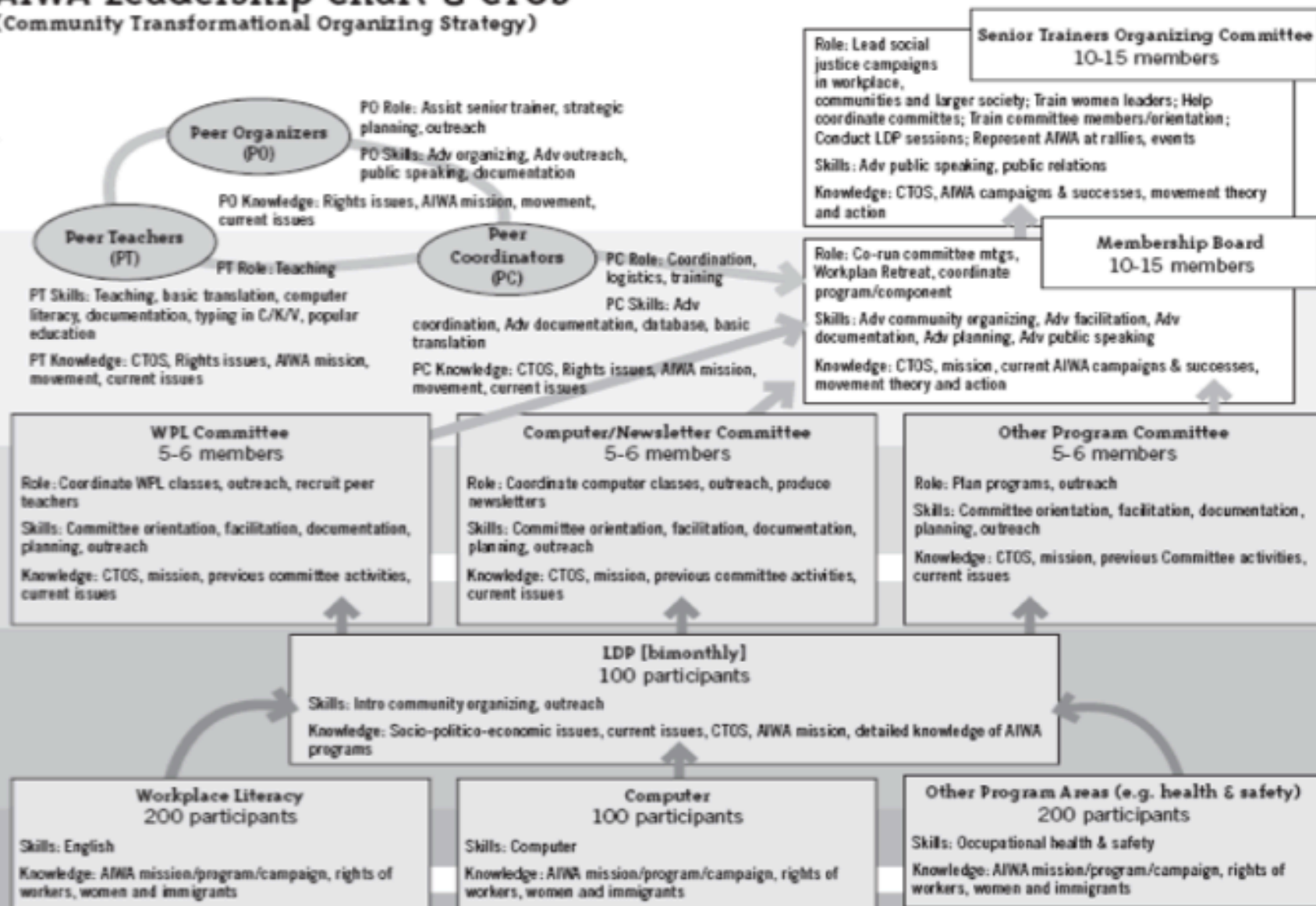
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CTOS

4

CTOS

3



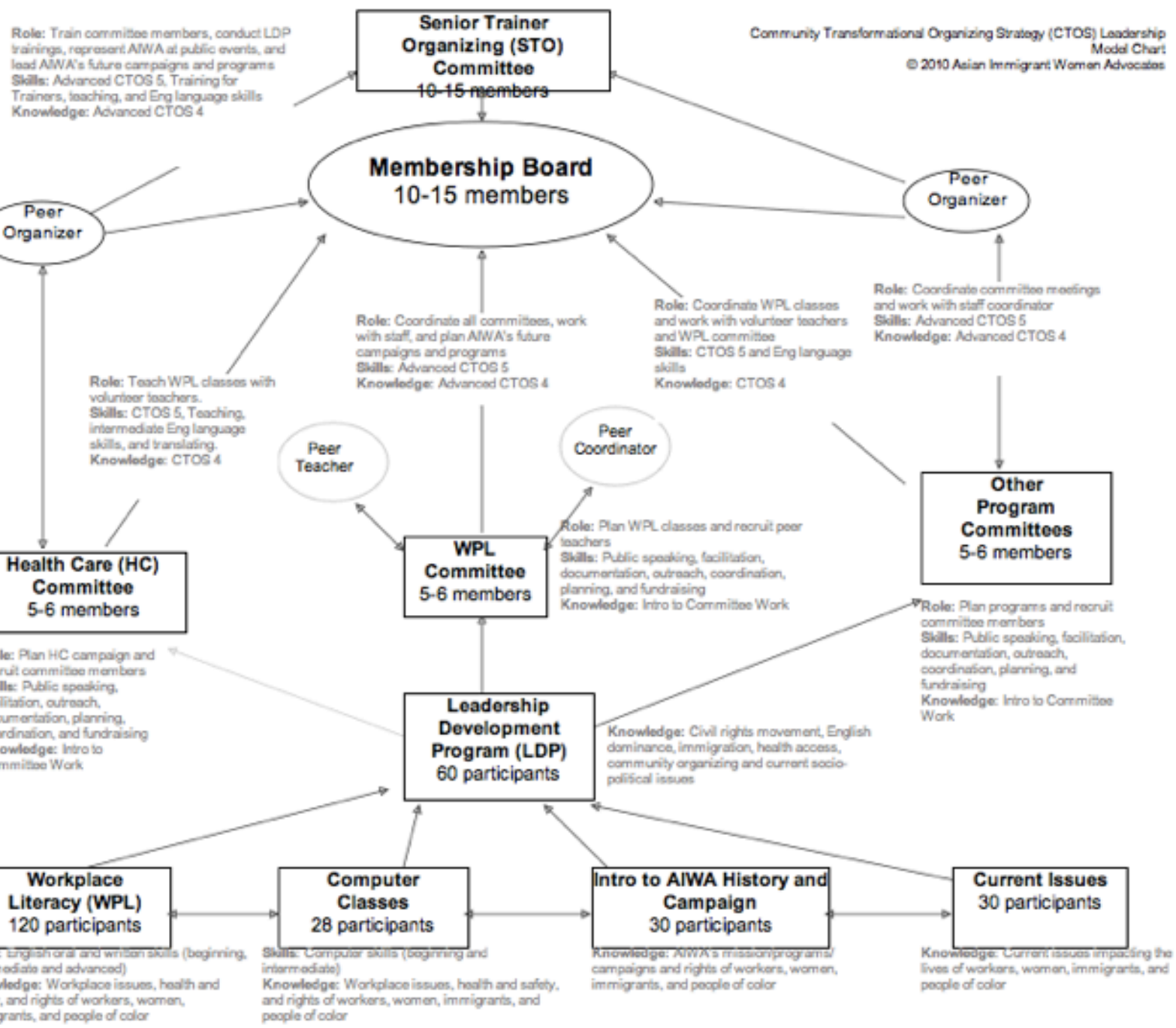
**CTOS 7
Collective Action
For Social
Justice**

**CTOS 6
Leadership
in Action**

**CTOS 5
Hands-on
LDP
Training**

**CTOS 4
LDP
Training**

**CTOS 3
Education**



Ella Baker on Grassroots Leadership

- **Systematic critique:** understand one's position in systems of inequality and subordination and one's potential power to change them (consciousness and action)
 - **Process of revaluation:** need for people to have a sense of their own value and their strengths
 - **Self-reliance:** “My basic sense...has always been to get people to understand that in the long run they themselves are the only protection they have against violence and injustice...People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves” (Baker 1973)
 - **Group-centered leadership** (not charismatic leader-centered groups)

Payne, Charles. 1989. “Ella Baker and Models of Social Change” *SIGNS* 14(4): 885-899.

Popular Education: self-revaluation (CTOS 3)

Immigration -> life of everyday isolation and disenfranchisement

- Moving to the U.S. means one “either sews or washes dishes”
- Local advice: “When we came to Oakland, my relatives told me, ‘If someone falls, don’t try to help them get up.’”
- “What is life like in a cup? Eat, sleep, go to work, finish work, come home, it’s that simple.”

Self-education as source of revaluation

- learning English as route to dignity
- “take time for yourself”
- No longer rush home to prepare dinner before class
- New sources of respect from children and husband (e.g. Rosa Parks story)

Peer to peer training: Self-reliance (CTOS 4)

- **CTOS chart: transparent, integrated, accessible**
- **Members communicate to each other about AIWA**

“If you have a chart, it’s easier for people to understand and see. It makes things simple [and gives women] something to compare themselves to. Like, ‘Oh, I’m at level 3 right now. If I learn this much more over the next few months, I’ll be at level 4.’”

“This chart, if you look at it, it looks like a spider’s web, it’s very complicated. But, actually, when we explain the structure carefully, then new members understand that AIWA proceeds and plans according to this structure.”

Group-centered leadership (CTOS 6-7)

- Recognize each other as leaders and potential leaders in action (peer teachers, peer organizers, public representatives)
 - “I consider myself a leader”
 - “See Hai Yan or Lan Fong as a leader”

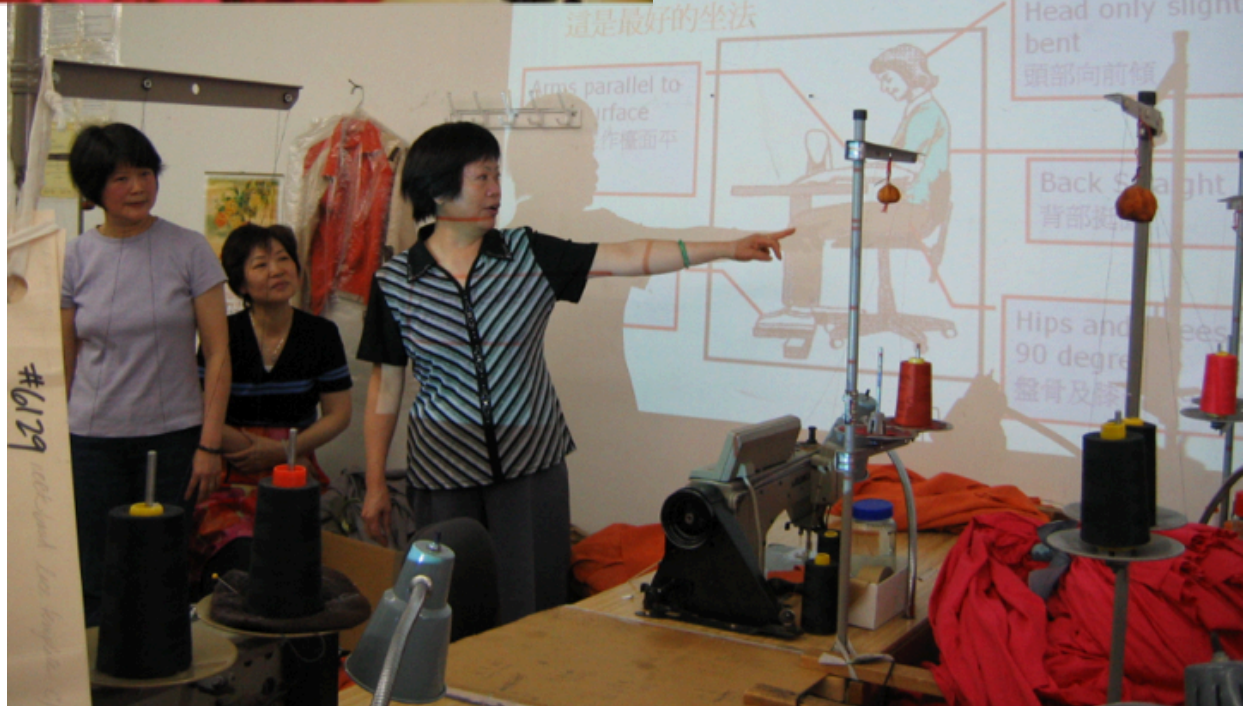
“If people do it all for you, then you don’t have to do it. But, now, we make the plan ourselves in cooperation with youth, other women...What’s different? The feeling is different”

“We’ve done something we never thought we could do. The workers in Oakland now know there’s an ergonomic chair that’s good for their health. Everybody’s talking about the chair.”



Proactive
campaigns

Grassroots
expertise



Work, subjectivity and the political

- From labor to work; from class antagonisms to refashioning political subjectivities
- Work as site of subject-making and the making of political subjectivities
 - “The struggle against work is a matter of securing not only better work, but also the time and money necessary to have a life outside work” (Weeks 2011, 13)

Work of social movement organizing

- **Redefining who has the “right to have rights” (Arendt)**
 - Not dependent on any particular political organization or system (i.e. it is derived from no natural set of laws)
 - “The right comes into being when it is exercised, and exercised by those who act in concert, in alliance” (Butler 2011)
 - **Beyond a “politics of the street”**
 - Refashioning political subjectivities about changing one’s location in everyday social space through series of **felt and embodied transitions** from “one power of existence to another” (Massumi 2012)

Challenges and Constraints

- Strategic leadership?
- Role of organizers and strategic campaigns
- Ethnic solidarity vs. multi-racial and broad-based solidarity
- Isolated from broader dynamism of immigrant worker rights' movement