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

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—July 119, 2014
MUJERES UNIDAS Y ACTIVAS

*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”

self-activity, self-representation, collective action

GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT as theory of change

everyday isolation, social marginalization, political disenfranchisement
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
Participatory Action Research (2007-2012)

Focus groups (17) with AIWA members (50)
In-depth interviews (15) with staff and allies

Surveys (181)  Archival  CTOS membership database
• Joint presentations and publications

• 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

Jessica McClintock picketed for wages owed by subcontractor

Workers didn’t get paid by bankrupt sewing factory

By Steven A. Chin

Seeking compensation for the back wages they are owed after their sewing factory folded, some former garment workers have rallied in front of the San Francisco headquarters of Jessica McClintock’s company to press the company to pay them what they are owed.

“Jessica McClintock may be able to hide behind their system of subcontracting which created the sweatshops that have plagued many garment workers for years, but she cannot hide from the problem,” said Yvonne Rho, executive director of the San Francisco-based rights group "Asian Immigrant Women Advocates."" Jessica McClintock’s company has refused to pay workers who have been laid off due to the economic downturn.

More rallies are planned for this month in San Francisco and around the country as part of a national campaign to improve industry wages and working conditions for garment workers.

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19th century clothes... and sweatshop conditions to match...

Jessica McClintock says:

Let Them Eat Lace.

“If you’re rich, you can do anything. Jessica McClintock, but the worker who’s not... still not been paid. You can help.

19th century clothes... and sweatshop conditions to match...

Jessica McClintock says:

Let Them Eat Lace.
Garment workers demand justice from Jessica McClintock, Inc.
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)
Community Transformational Organizing Strategy (CTOS) Leadership Model Chart

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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)

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.”
Grassroots experience

Proactive campaigns
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