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LRR Voices: Health & Safety for Unorganized, Immigrant Workers

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Abstract

Pam Tau Lee is Labor Coordinator at the Labor Occupational Health Program at the University of California, Berkeley, and serves on the boards of the National Toxic Campaign Fund, National People of Color Environmental Summit, and the Chinese Progressive Association. She recently returned from Slovakia where she collaborated with environmentalists and worker representatives in setting up a participatory approach to health and safety research. LRR asked Lee to comment on the crucial role labor can play in the area of health and safety for unorganized, immigrant workers.

Keywords

Pam Tau Lee, Labor Occupational Health Program, University of California Berkeley, National Toxic Campaign Fund, National People of Color Environmental Summit, Chinese Progressive Association, health and safety, immigration

LRR VOICES: Health & Safety for Unorganized, Immigrant Workers

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Workers of color throughout the world and in the U.S. are consistently employed in the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs. As a result, they suffer a disproportionate high rate of illness, injury, and death. The best way to tackle the occupational health crisis faced by workers of color is to struggle for empowerment in the workplace and community.

Across the country, a grassroots environmental movement is growing; communities of color are waking up to the dangers of toxic dumping in their neighborhoods. For example, the study *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* reports that "three out of every five black and Hispanic Americans lived in communities with uncontrolled waste sites; 50% of Native Americans and Asians also live in these conditions." New leadership is emerging to direct the fight, coalitions are being formed, and fights are being waged.

In contrast, the crisis in the workplace is not met with the same vigor. Unemployment and the threat of unemployment, lack of skills and education, and an inability to speak English are decisive factors in keeping workers of color tied to hazardous working conditions. Furthermore, immigrants are reluctant to push for health and safety improvements fearing that the employer will call the INS in retaliation.

Everyday we hear stories of companies eliminating bargaining unit jobs and subcontracting these jobs to non-union, workers of color. Typically, these jobs will have less pay, no benefits, substandard work conditions and no health and safety protection.

It is not enough for the union to stand up for their members and fight to win their union jobs back. *Unions need to expose the racism behind the actions of the company—and offer aid to the innocent workers whose lives have been endangered.* Why is it

considered acceptable for workers of color to work for less pay in dangerous working conditions? Workers of color are deliberately targeted because they are vulnerable and unprotected. Unions can play a leading role in challenging the social acceptability of relegating workers of color into the most hazardous jobs. Unions can start backing up non-union workers and organizing the industries where immigrant workers are found.

Unions also need to develop positive working relationships with organizations serving communities of color including grassroots groups, vocational education programs, and service agencies. Some unions offer successful models. They are integrated into the activities of the community and have developed a reputation for fighting for workers of color. These unions attend community meetings and fairs, participate in community-based vocational education programs, and conduct programs to educate the community about unions.

The union's presence in the community and its commitment to back up unorganized workers struggling for better health and safety conditions can pay off. In Oakland, California, the Glass, Molders, Pottery, Plastics, and Allied Workers linked up with Spanish-speaking nonunion workers participating in an occupational health and safety training. After the training, two workers were fired when they stood up for their health and safety rights. They went to the union for help and the union pledged to back them up. The workers decided to fight for union recognition—and won! Now they are negotiating their first contract. Says Ignacio De La Fuente, GMPP International Representative, "No one wants to be treated as second class people, they are entitled to protect their health and not breath in toxics. It's a matter of respect; our union understands that and together we waged a campaign and won."

With a grant from the City College Labor Studies Program, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in San Francisco set up a satellite office in the Chinatown community. In addition to serving union members, they teach English and offer programs that serve the needs of Chinese workers such as health and safety in the workplace. The local was at the forefront of a fight for 300 non-union workers left stranded when their employers padlocked their factories and fled to Taiwan. Action such as this puts the union in good standing and this gets translated into community support.

Labor education programs are beginning to address immigrant



workers' needs. One of the best is located in San Francisco. The City College Labor Studies Program, rooted in the community, offers vocational ESL for immigrant construction workers. Curriculum includes: English on the job, taught by the vocational education instructors; workplace health and safety taught by the Labor Occupational Health Program; workplace rights taught by the co-sponsoring unions. Collaborative efforts like these, especially with unions and Committee for Occupational Safety and Health groups, can bring the labor movement in touch with potentially new mem-

bers in an atmosphere where they can learn about unions without being exposed to retaliation.

Other models include the California Immigrant Workers Association founded by the AFL-CIO (see "Organizing Ourselves", elsewhere in this issue) and the newly-developed Hotel Workers Association in Portland, Oregon founded by the Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees International Union and the Center for Third World Organizing.

We have to look at organizing differently. When communities tackle issues such as tuberculosis, lead contaminated housing, or toxics in the workplace, these often fall into separate categories such as health, housing, and labor. The labor movement can be a unifying agent in these struggles, but only if unions organize workers of color and include them in the leadership, make these issues a priority, and enter into effective nationwide coalitions with civil rights and environmental activists. The struggle for a society free of racial discrimination must be linked to the movement for a safe and healthy society. ■