

Los Angeles; Asian Workers Flex Their Union Muscles; Labor: Employees are organizing, despite the stance of some Asian business owners, who urge them to show ethnic solidarity.

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When the Chinese Daily News threatened pay cuts in what it called salary reconstruction, employees' frustration erupted into the unexpected: the formation of a union.

The move pleased the AFL-CIO. And to the union federation it was evidence that its efforts to lure Asian Americans are paying off.

Even more surprising are recent efforts by Asian American workers to organize in defiance of Asian bosses.

In Los Angeles and Orange counties, there are at least six union campaigns led by Asian American workers--two of them involving Asian- owned businesses.

"With Asian labor organizing, we're definitely on a major upswing," said Quynh Nguyen, organizing director of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance. "L.A. is a sign of what's to come. L.A. is considered on the cutting edge of organizing."

Since organizing under the AFL-CIO a decade ago, the alliance's training efforts have increased the number of Asian American organizers within the AFL-CIO from fewer than 10 to more than 100 nationwide. The organization has also been bolstered by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney's calls on the union to reach out to immigrant workers.

The alliance "doesn't have the same resources and capacity as other organizations, but it has been extremely effective at training and recruiting," said Kent Wong, director of the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education and the alliance's first president.

"It has been a huge breakthrough for Asian American workers," Wong said.

About 12% of Asian American workers belong to unions nationwide, a figure that has remained fairly steady in the last decade. Overall, 13.5% of American workers belong to unions, down from about 20% in the early 1980s, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor.

The formation last year of an Asian Pacific Islander Caucus in the state Assembly has brought more visibility to the Asian American labor movement.

In May, Assemblywoman Judy Chu (D-Monterey Park) joined by members of the Labor Committee and the Asian Pacific Islander Caucus, heard testimony from mostly Asian immigrant employees about exploitation in the workplace. The hearing produced a report by the UCLA labor center and the alliance and could result in legislation next year, said Denise Ng, a field representative for Chu's office.

"This was the first of its kind," Ng said of the meeting. "People came from all over the state to testify, and they waited for hours to speak." Chu and her team are planning a similar hearing in the Bay Area by the end of the year.

Last month, the alliance organized a town hall meeting of Asian Pacific Islander working families, which featured workers' testimonies and pledges by Chu and Assemblywomen Carol Liu (D-La Canada Flintridge) and Jackie Goldberg (D-Los Angeles) to support the Asian American labor efforts, partly through better enforcement of labor laws.

Although there's a history of Asian American unionizing, including that of Chinese railroad workers and Japanese and Filipino farm workers, such efforts historically have not been as consistent or as widely known as those by blacks and Latinos.

And they rarely emerged within Asian-owned business, primarily because of the loyalty many Asian Americans have felt to friends and relatives who hired them, but also because racial discrimination has prevented workers from finding work elsewhere, said L. Ling-chi Wang, a professor of Asian American studies at UC Berkeley.

But Asian American employers have also used this loyalty to manipulate workers, urging employees not to fight with bosses to show ethnic solidarity, said Katie Quan, a former seamstress who served nine years as the Pacific Northwest head of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. "But when push comes to shove, workers really understand that they have rights and that the boss is trying to exploit them."

Recent local struggles by Asian American workers have been fierce.

The Chinese Daily News, the largest Chinese-language paper in the Los Angeles area, with a circulation of more than 100,000, refuses to recognize its union. The management called last year's 78-63 vote illegal and challenged the result with the National Labor Relations Board in September after losing a regional decision. The paper said vote results should be overturned because some supervisors supported the union before the election.

Lynne Wang, a Chinese Daily News reporter who has been the paper's most vocal union supporter, said the opposite had occurred: A supervisor had urged

employees to vote against the union.

NLRB guidelines say that the board should rule by Sept. 17, a year after the case was appealed, but Bruce Meachum, a representative of the Newspaper Guild, doesn't expect a decision soon.

"It's a little strange and very unfair," Meachum said. "The company uses this time to intimidate a lot of employees."

But Steve Atkinson, a lawyer for the Chinese Daily News, said the newspaper's workers are ignorant of the way American unions operate. "That Asian community is not familiar with the way the [Communication Workers of America] organizes," He said. "[Those] Asians were not sophisticated enough to understand what they were being told was a bunch of lies."

Steve Gao, the business department manager at the paper, said that, if a fair election were held, management would honor it.

"If employees want a union, then that's good for them, let's have a union," he said. But despite the outcome of the election, Gao maintained that the conservative nature of Chinese workers, a reluctance to speak up to superiors or rock the boat, makes it difficult to tell if they're pro-or anti-union.

Because unions in Asian countries do not resemble unions in the United States, Quan and other labor experts said, Asian American employers and employees can have skewed perceptions of American labor.

Unions in Taiwan, for example, have been heavily involved in politics and some immigrants might assume that even a small union here would play a similar role.

"I remember trying to organize Taiwanese workers, and they were so scared," said Quan, a labor policy specialist at UC Berkeley's Center for Labor Research and Education. "They didn't want to be associated with a political association."

In Koreatown, the situation at Assi Plaza has grown so tense that former workers have marched as many as eight hours a day since Aug. 1, urging a boycott of the market.

Last month, 56 workers were forced off the job in what Assi's office manger, Vincent Ju, called an unpaid "nondisciplinary leave of absence" until the workers fixed a problem with Social Security numbers.

Ju said the company's actions have "nothing to do with the union," but workers insisted the opposite. Ju countered that four workers have been rehired.

Although most of the workers involved at Assi Plaza are Latino-- only six are Korean--the picketing and union efforts have been headed by the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, many of whose members speak fluent Spanish.

About 145 members of Assi's work force, which is roughly half Korean and half Latino, voted last spring on whether to join the fledgling Immigrant Workers Union. The election was too close to call, and the case is before the NLRB.

Though the union effort has been led by a Korean organization, a former market employee, Chin Yol Yi, said the owners' race has nothing to do with the organizing.

"Whether they were Korean or any other race, if they had treated us fairly for many years, the union issue would never have arisen in Assi," Yi said through a translator.

Yi is a member of the Immigrant Workers Union board and maintains that he was fired in April because he was the only Korean employee who was pictured on a flier urging support of the union. Management said that Yi had given away several dollars' worth of sashimi to a customer.

The collaboration between Koreans and Latinos at Assi highlights what many unionists hail as the future of labor organizing.

"If we're united, we can obtain many things," one market employee, Elodia Martinez, said in Spanish while taking a break from the picket line outside the store. She carried a handmade sign with Korean characters on one side and "Spanglish" on the other.

Hopes for building such alliances were evident a few weeks ago when Asian American and Latino workers crammed into East Los Angeles College's student center for the alliance's meeting. They called for unity in Chinese, Korean, Tagalog and Spanish. And Chu added to their excitement when she shouted, "The bosses may have the money, but we have the people, and we can win!"

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: Lynne Wang, a reporter for the Chinese Daily News, has been one of the staff's most vocal advocates for joining a union.; PHOTOGRAPHER: AL SEIB / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: Former employees picket Assi Plaza. Most of them are Latino, but union advocates are Koreans.; PHOTOGRAPHER: GINA FERAZZI / Los Angeles Times