

Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Women Workers Take on the Global Factory

By Miriam Ching Yoon Louie. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2001. 306 pp.

reviewed by Anne O'Byrne

In a scene in David Riker's 1998 film, *La Ciudad*, the Latina heroine sits at her sewing machine at the sweatshop weeping quietly as her supervisor leans over her, yelling. The heroine, worried about her sick child back at home and frustrated in all her efforts to get together money to help the little girl, doesn't look at the supervisor but bows her head and cries, helpless. But, as the supervisor's rage rises, the machines in the factory fall silent one by one until the moment when the screaming woman realizes what has happened and she too falls silent. She slowly looks around at the faces of the workers. Suddenly, she is no longer a boss but one person confronted by a powerful wall of silent solidarity.

Miriam Ching Yoon Louie's *Sweatshop Warriors* tells part of the story of what can happen next. Based largely on interviews with dozens of Mexican, Chinese and Korean women who have worked in the sweatshops of New York, Texas and California, this work recounts the frustrations of lives lived at the mercy of abusive employers but also tells what can happen when workers use their solidarity as a platform from which to challenge those employers, winning withheld back pay, better working conditions and recognition in return. It is a book with very many stories of the oppression of women immigrants and their suffering at the hands of sub-contractors and multi-national corporations, indifferent trade unions and an uninformed public, supplemented by statistics on the growth of *maquiladoras*, the effects of NAFTA and the changing patterns of immigration to the US in the past three decades, but it is ultimately an account of the empowering transformation from sweatshop victims to what Louie, in inspirational mode, calls sweatshop warriors.

Significantly, this is not a story of the triumph of trade unionism; if anything, it documents a serious gap in its structure. For instance, in 1993, Jenny Chen was one of 20 Chinese women to lose their jobs when Empress Fashion in New York City closed down, owing the women \$60,000 in back wages. They were members of ILGWU/UNITE and so naturally went to their union for help. Chen said in an interview:

[T]he union didn't do a thing. I had stayed at the shop because it was union and I needed medical benefits when I was pregnant. But the union doesn't really help you. The union runs ads and press releases in the newspaper that they have a hotline, and if you are owed your hard-earned pay, come in. But a lot of times when you go there, they just yell at you (40).

In other cases, there seems to have been no union to turn to as Kim Seung Min found when she went looking for labor law information after being laid off from her restaurant job in Los Angeles' Koreatown in 1997.

The organizations where these two women eventually did find help are typical of the many groups and workers' centers that began to appear in the late 1970s and 1980s to fill the gap left by the unions. Jenny Chen turned to the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association (CSWA), an group that came into being in New York in 1979 when Chinese restaurant workers began discussing "their desire for rights and dignity in the workplace (201)." Some of the founding members had already cut their teeth on campaigns for tenants' rights in Chinatown, against racist hiring practices in the construction industry, against police brutality and in favor of the normalization of US-China relations, and when, in 1980, a group of Chinese men were rejected by the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders Union, Local 69, CSWA could help them set up their own union. Years later, when Jenny Chen's employer absconded, the CSWA Women's Committee had the resources to help her and her co-workers launch a campaign for the back pay owed by their former employer.

For Kim Seung Min, already familiar with workers' struggles and organizations in Korea, the first challenge in LA was to find people she could trust to give her the information and support she needed. Korean Immigrant Workers' Advocates (KIWA) inspired immediate confidence.

"When I got there I began to gain trust because there was a picture of Chun Tae Il [the Korean garment union martyr]...When I saw Chun Tae Il's picture I started crying. Oh, this must be an organization I can trust(150)."

Having successfully resolved her own layoff case and after volunteering at KIWA for a number of years, Kim Seung Min joined the organization staff and now spends her time working with workers struggling as she did. She told Louie:

“The biggest problem they have is in standing up for themselves, because they feel they are under the family system, under the husband. It’s very difficult when they don’t have the support of their husband and family(151).”

In fact, for the most part husbands remain a shadowy presence in this work. Maria del Carmen Dominguez of La Mujer Obrera, a Texas workers’ center founded by women workers after a punishing strike at Farah in 1981, can speak of the husband who supported her “so much through many, many years (88).” At the center she discovered that it was not enough to work just for her husband and her family, that she needed to work for herself too, and she talks in glowing terms of what she learned about how to communicate with people, how to organize classes and how to build bridges to other organizations and other communities. But for many women one of toughest struggles happen at home. Viola Casares, whose own lifeline eventually came in the form of Fuerza Unida in San Antonio, Texas, was married at 18. “My husband was real macho and jealous and would not let me work (80).” Another woman remarks, matter-of-factly; “I got married in Mexico, but the person I married was treating me bad, so I moved here [to Los Angeles] (78).”

Both these women are representatives of what Louie points to as an increasingly feminized pattern of migration, with women sometimes moving to the United States to follow male family members but often making the decision quite independently or out of concern for their children’s future.

In the course of its 250 pages, Louie’s book presents a broad, if somewhat episodic, account of the successes of women who enter this country with high hopes, work long hard hours and only to come close to having the hope that sustained them dashed by sweatshop employers and unhelpful trade unions. In each case the workers’ center extends a helping hand, first of all by showing the women that they are not alone and then by providing them with the information and training they need to fight for their own rights. One gap in the book’s structure, though, is a clear and detailed account of how organizations like these come to be. There are some references to groups of disillusioned workers gathering over cups of coffee, but then most often the scene changes to a snapshot of smiling, empowered workers in an established office, wearing campaign tee-shirts and running off flyers. What happened in between? How are such centers funded? What experience or education does it take to begin the process of setting one up? There are frequent references, for example, to Cecilia Rodriguez and her husband Guillermo Rodriguez Glenn who were obviously instrumental in the founding of La Mujer Obrera, and I found myself wanting to know more of their story.

Also, as Louie tells the story of these various womens’ struggles, she marshals considerable information to explain and illustrate their role as workers and activists in an increasingly globalized labour market, drawing the connection between the situation of workers in Korea and the situations they find themselves in here, or explaining the waves of migrants who came first from the Guangdong province in China only to be followed by a new wave from Fujian province consisting of workers willing to work even longer hours in even worse conditions. Yet even as she points to the employers who keep their workers in ignorance, the police who shrug their shoulders and the trade unions who look the other way, there is little attempt made to demonstrate the responsibility that we as members of the public share. Continued consumer indifference to the conditions in which clothing is made perpetuates the sweatshop system, and if shoppers could be mobilized the issue would quickly shift to the center of public attention.

In fact, *Sweatshop Warriors* is a valuable step towards making this happen. The women’s voices we hear in this book tell us about marches against restaurateurs in L.A.’s Koreatown, a hunger strike a Levi plaza in San Francisco or a rally at Sears in New York City. These are events which rarely meet the mainstream media criteria for coverage and so risk remaining invisible to the general public, just as sweatshop workers remain invisible in the backrooms of obscure parts of our cities. Part of what it means to become a sweatshop warrior is to become visible and vocal, and this book provides a valuable and stirring record of these women warriors’ voices.

Anne O’Byrne is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Hofstra University.

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