



ESTATE OF CORKY LEE

The Gallery at the Center *presents*

# We Are One

The 1982 International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union Strike

Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race  
420 Hamilton Hall, 1130 Amsterdam Avenue  
September 2022 - May 2023



# 我們一條心

WE ARE ONE was the rallying cry during the brief and successful strike forty years ago when 20,000 members of Local 23-25 of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) walked off the job in protest. There was an extraordinary outpouring of energy from the Chinese immigrant women workers, who wrote their pages in labor history and in the history of New York's Chinatown community.

## FACTORY WORK AND UNION CULTURE

To understand the strike we need to ask: What was the work like? How did union organizers create a culture of solidarity? Immigrants have always been key to a thriving garment industry in the U.S, and in the 1970s and 1980s the work was still hard on body and mind, conditions often unsafe, and wages insufficient.

The ILGWU — a leader in advocating for immigrant rights since the early 1900s — was active in Chinatown in many of the ways it had been in the Lower East side decades before. Classes to improve English fluency, assistance with citizenship applications, and a variety of social and cultural activities all helped to engage workers. There were 25,000 Chinese garment workers in NYC by 1980; more than 80 percent were women, and unlike the Jewish and Italian young women who came before, most of these workers in Chinatown were married.



## THE ORGANIZERS

In the spring of 1982 the ILGWU negotiated an industry-wide contract renewal with hundreds of employers covering nearly 150,000 garment workers along the entire east coast. All had agreed to a new contract save for some contractors belonging to a Chinatown employers' association. The union decided to continue working without a contract and approach the Chinese employers individually.

The Committee to Defend the Union Contract was formed, with hundreds of Chinese worker volunteers signing up thousands of members to support the contract. Using Chinese and English leaflets, phone banks and media outreach, they engaged the community and countered the contractors' "us versus them" narrative, which attempted to pit the Chinese ethnic community against the non-Chinese union leaders and the large clothing manufacturers.



TOP: MUSEUM OF CHINESE IN AMERICA  
BOTTOM: KHEEL CENTER AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY

## THE RALLIES

The rally in Columbus Park on June 24th, 1982 was the largest in the history of the local, and in the history of the Chinatown community. Nearly 20,000 garment workers and their supporters showed up to demand a contract equal to that of garment workers across the industry. They shocked employers, who expected the mostly immigrant and Chinese-speaking women to follow tradition and stay out of the public eye.

Labor leaders from the national ILGWU and NYC Central Labor Council joined Local 23-25's Manager Jay Mazur to make rousing speeches. So too did garment worker leaders speaking in Chinese with English translation. Shui Mak Ka, Alice Ip, and others galvanized the crowd and led them in the inspiring chant "We Are One!" The leadership of hundreds of Chinese worker volunteers successfully mobilized and electrified the community. Another record-breaking crowd gathered again on July 15 — their energy and sense of purpose and solidarity still strong. Workers streamed into Columbus Park for the rally, culminating with a march that filled the streets of Chinatown. The goal was to pressure the minority of employers who had not responded to the first rally to sign the contracts now. It worked. Within 24 hours all the contracts had been signed and settled.



ABOVE: KHEEL CENTER AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY  
BOTTOM LEFT: ESTATE OF CORKY LEE

## LEGACY

A culture of solidarity among workers was a signature feature of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union throughout the twentieth century, sometimes more aspirational than real.

The 1982 strike was a watershed moment — particularly for the immigrant Chinese women garment workers. These women workers were emboldened. They became more active in community organizations, particularly around schools and healthcare. Their concerns were taken seriously in the union, as child care centers, immigration services, educational, cultural and political programs grew.

The decline of clothing manufacturing in the US began well before the strike, and the trend has only gathered momentum in the decades since. Yet there has been a lasting impact — on the status of women and workers in the Chinatown community and on union culture. It lives on in the children and grandchildren of strikers and organizers — young people who went to college, and some who have now returned to enrich and spark positive change in the neighborhoods where they grew up.



## **Exhibition Acknowledgements**

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