



BUILD YOUR OWN BASE

by Young Shin

I have always felt in my 15 years of working at Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) that the most difficult, yet rewarding, challenge of community organizing is building grassroots leadership among the low-income Asian immigrant women with whom we work. At AIWA we strongly believe that these women have to be the primary force in shaping socioeconomic policies that affect them. True social change can come only from the bottom up.

AIWA's Garment Workers Justice Campaign, for example, would not have succeeded without first building and strengthening leadership at the local level. People seem to forget that the campaign did not start in a vacuum. It was the result of 10 years of fostering leadership skills among Asian immigrant women: teaching them English and educating them about workers' rights; showing them how to call Pacific Bell and ask questions about their bills; and organizing field trips for workers and their families to Angel Island, Brentwood Fruit Farms and Golden Gate Park.

Meeting for a Reason

It took many late-night meetings and weekend gatherings (and, people say, tons of chow mein and kimbo) to build the base of garment workers, electronics assemblers, janitors, nursing home workers and hotel workers we have now.

Yet it has become increasingly clear to us that many organizations and people do not appreciate the challenging work it takes to build a base in immigrant communities of color. In order to build a base, AIWA organizes many meetings and gatherings so the women can discuss the issues affecting their lives.

For an immigrant woman to participate in these meetings and gatherings, she often must find someone to look after the children or elderly parents.

Even when these needs are met, she arrives at the meeting tired from a full day's work, or anxious about wrapping up as soon as possible so that she can go home to take care of her little ones. To accommodate the women's schedules, we met at nights and on weekends at the AIWA office and sometimes at Burger Kings that were near bus stops. The meetings needed to be extremely focused and short, as well as fun and productive.

Unfortunately, we find disregard for and, indeed, ignorance of the challenges involved in building grassroots leadership when organizations casually invite AIWA members to attend a meeting at the last minute or to join a "network" or "coalition" with which we have no previous working relationship.

Looking for a "Face"

Those of us who work as paid organizers or advocates can attend meetings on work time—a luxury we often take for granted. However, if an immigrant woman worker wants to participate in these coalition and network meetings, she not only faces the above-mentioned difficulties at home but often needs to take time off from her job, resulting in lost wages. When she does make it to a meeting, she usually finds the format confusing and the atmosphere intimidating. AIWA staff often end up providing translation services.

I cannot help but conclude that leadership of these coalitions, networks and national/international organizations contact AIWA only when they need to put a "face" to their statistics or want to hear a good testimonial upon which they can base policy. They expect local leadership to come at their beck and call. They pay lip service to the importance of grassroots leadership but have neither the interest in nor the commitment to developing such leadership.

These groups may say they are working on behalf of immigrant, low-

income, limited-English-speaking communities, yet their organizational structures tell a different story. They often lack support and leadership from the very population they purport to represent. We get dozens of these calls from such groups every month. And people wonder why we turn them down.

Not Another Random Network

As community organizers, we shouldn't run around forming random coalitions or networks, attending everyone's meetings and producing slick but empty documents that have no practical application to the lives of the people we represent; we should concentrate on building leadership among our constituencies. Nothing else can take precedence over that.

Banding together as "networks" or "coalitions" can be useful when groups are trying to deal with immediate issues, such as supporting or defeating an impending vote on a particular piece of legislation, but often I think we just have to let some things go. Organizations like AIWA do not have enough resources to do everything. A legislative victory to raise the minimum wage is meaningless if workers aren't aware that such a thing exists or are scared to confront and fight their employers for it. We believe truly effective coalitions and networks must be initiated and formed by the base of people who are affected by the issues.

I firmly believe in working together to bring justice to all. We do want to participate in networks, coalitions and organizations that are accountable to their members and the constituencies. If you want to develop a network, build it as such from the bottom up. Do not just label it as such for political, publicity or fund-raising purposes. I believe the time is long overdue for all of us in the community to put this issue on the public agenda and engage in a constructive dialogue. ■