

ii. power



Members of ILGWU, Local 23-25 on strike, New York City's Chinatown, 1982.

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RACE CLASS
GENDER



At a strike meeting of ILGWU Local 23-25 garment workers, New York Chinatown, 1982.

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Memories of the 1982 ILGWU Strike in New York Chinatown

Katie Quan

In June 1982, more than 20,000 immigrant women garment workers went on strike in New York Chinatown to demand a good contract. Their employers demanded deep cutbacks in wages and benefits, and threatened to withdraw from the union altogether if their demands weren't met. However at the sight of thousands of immigrant women workers marching through the streets of Chinatown, the employers quickly withdrew their demands, and within hours the workers and their union had won the strike.

This is how I remember it.

Background

When I arrived in New York Chinatown in 1975, the garment industry was booming with over 10,000 immigrant women sewing in some 300 Chinese-owned factories that contracted for Seventh Avenue brands. On every block you could hear the whirring of the sewing machines and the hissing of the steam presses coming from the nineteenth century brick loft buildings that were dimly lit until late at night. On the narrow streets dark-skinned, muscular men from the Caribbean and Latin America would yell for everyone to move out of their way as they loaded rack upon rack of finished garments into huge trucks destined for uptown Manhattan manufacturers. You could sense the raw energy in the air, as everyone hustled for a greater share of the pie.

The women who worked inside these factories were almost all recent immigrants from Hong Kong and southern China. They

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had come to New York after 1965 when immigration policy that had discriminated against Asians was changed, and men could apply for their wives and families to join them. Not able to speak English, but forced to work because they were poor, the newly arrived women had few options but to work in garment factories. Like earlier waves of immigrants from Europe, the Caribbean, and Latin America, these Chinese women found garment factory work to be backbreaking, and basic survival to be a struggle.

My hope was to organize these workers. I had been a student activist in the Bay Area, but late one night I peeked into a small sewing factory in Oakland Chinatown and was stunned to see the women still sewing under a dull fluorescent glow, surrounded by piles of garments. This image reminded me of my grandmothers, immigrant women from China, who had toiled and struggled in sweatshops like this one, so that their children and grandchildren might have better lives. At that moment I became convinced that only when Chinese immigrant women workers stand up for themselves would there really be justice and lasting change in their conditions. Since I could speak Cantonese and knew how to sew, I decided I would become a factory worker myself and try to organize from within.

Work

It was surreal, like watching in a Truffaut movie, except I was in the middle of it. My co-workers were cackling and pointing at me, while I sat traumatized and speechless after sewing right into my own finger. I tried to pull the needle out with my fingers, but to my horror the muscles surrounding the needle sucked it in even deeper. "Use your teeth!" my co-workers called out to me. I was doubtful, but since they were all watching and waiting, I went ahead and bit the needle with my front teeth, held on tightly, and slowly pulled the needle out. The boss checked for needle fragments in my finger, saw that it was clear, gave me iodine and a band-aid, and announced that I had "graduated." Actually, it was more like a hazing, and it left me an emotional wreck.

Hours were long and pay was low. Wages were calculated by piece rate, where each sewing operation was assigned a price, and the more you sewed, the more you earned. Each time a new style was introduced, which might be twice or more a day, the employers tried to set prices as low as they could. If the price was too low, workers would complain, and sometimes fierce shouting matches would take place. Life was a battle, as piece rate workers negotiated real earnings on a daily basis.

I call the piece rate system the system of being both the slave and the slave driver. You're the slave because you're the one doing the work. But you're the slave driver too, because you force yourself to work faster and faster, believing that the more pieces you sew, the more money you earn.

The most effective way of getting the boss to increase our piece rate was to all stop working until a fair price was negotiated. But work stoppages were hard to organize. Shops in New York averaged about fifty workers each, and I would have to make sure that each person agreed to the plan. I would talk it up while we were sewing, during lunch break, and after work while we were buying groceries. I would call my co-workers at home at night and bring it up on weekend outings. Some workers didn't like having direct confrontation with the bosses, and others were afraid of being identified as trouble-makers. A few workers might promise to participate but then would pull out at the last moment. But when we did stick together and win a higher piece rate it was a sweet victory.

Just about every garment worker in Chinatown belonged to the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), Local 23-25. The union had organized all the factories in Chinatown from the top down through union contracts that required all union manufacturers to do business with union contractors and *vice versa*. If either the contractor or manufacturer attempted to use a non-union firm, the union was allowed to strike the violating party, and all other union firms would be required to observe the picket line. This boycott usually brought the violating party into compliance pretty quickly.

Every three years, the union first bargained a new contract with the manufacturers, then it negotiated the same terms with the contractors, and finally the contractors negotiated the same terms with the manufacturers. This triangular bargaining system passed through wage increases and benefits from the manufacturers to the contractors, and then from the contractors to the workers. Since the union had organized nearly three quarters of the New York market's manufacturers, the triangular bargaining arrangement locked manufacturers, contractors, and workers into a highly unionized job market.¹

Chinatown Workers and the Union

Union contracts provided that all employees join the union within thirty days from the beginning of employment. But in reality Chinatown workers rushed to join the union, because after



Garment workers signing up for picket duty, New York Chinatown, 1982.

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six months of membership the union's health and welfare funds provided full coverage for members, as well as part of the cost of family coverage. To the health-conscious Chinese, these benefits were more important than wages. The union contract also provided for increases in wages, holiday pay, vacation benefits, access to the union's free health center, a defined pension benefit, and a death benefit.

In the 1970s joining the union may have been normal, but few of the Chinese members felt strong ties to the union. The local union's membership was close to 80 percent Chinese, but most meetings and union literature were not translated into Chinese, and there were not many programs for its Chinese members. Though there were Chinese-speaking union representatives, the union was viewed as an institution that was external to the Chinese community. Not many Chinese members were familiar with fundamental principles of American union democracy—that the members are the union, and that they have a right to a voice and vote in it. As a result, one of the biggest challenges for Chinese members was to organize within the union to make their voices heard.

In 1979 while I was working in a factory, I organized a group of rank-and-file women to petition the union to address our child care needs. At the time many garment workers were young women with children, and they would sew for employers at home

(which was not legal), or they would let older women care for their children. Waiting lists for the few child care centers in Chinatown were so long that even if parents applied the day their child was born, there was a good chance that the child would not get into a child care center before she entered kindergarten. To young working women with children, quality, affordable child care was more important than wage increases, eyeglass benefits, retirement benefits, or many other benefits that unions normally negotiate.

To show that our Committee's call for quality affordable child care was supported by large numbers of union members, my co-workers and I called a press conference to announce that we were going to collect signatures on a petition to the union. Somewhat to our surprise the issue caught on like wildfire, and in the next ten days we collected over 3000 signatures from other garment workers during our lunch breaks. It was the first time that Chinatown garment workers had organized for something that we wanted, and it showed that women's issues like child care were of burning concern.²

However local union officials did not appreciate us demanding something of them, and they refused to include members of our Committee in their meetings to consider child care. Our Committee was still figuring out our next move when the strike took place.

Strike

When fire singes the hairs on the skin of the women workers, they will rise up like tigers.

—Anonymous husband of a garment worker

Beginning in the 1960s, apparel manufacturers began to source production in the South of the U.S. and Puerto Rico, where unions were weak or non-existent. Unions followed the work south and organized the workers there. But when the manufacturers began to move into Latin America and Asia the union did not follow, believing that political differences with unions in these countries would make solidarity impossible.

By the 1970s the effects of globalization began to be felt as many manufacturers cut back American production and laid workers off. Our union told us that we were unemployed because workers in countries like the Philippines were "stealing our jobs" by working for "unconscionably low wages." ILGWU president Sol Chaiken even blamed "Red China," using red-baiting language that would scare people into thinking that China was our political and eco-

nomic enemy. But I thought that blaming workers in the Philippines and China for stealing American jobs was misguidedly fingering the victims, while letting the corporations escape blame. So I wrote a letter expressing these thoughts to my local union leader Jay Mazur, who in turn used this letter to let Chaiken know that the Chinese members objected to using this language. While Chaiken did not share my concerns, he at least refrained from using the term Red China again.

By the 1980s sourcing to offshore factories had severely disrupted the triangular bargaining arrangement. Manufacturers paid contractors overseas only a fraction of what they paid New York contractors, and rather than pass down increases as required by the union contract, they forced the New York contractors to accept increasingly lower prices. At first the contractors did not complain openly, however as the Chinese contractors gained experience, they began to flex their muscles. In 1982, instead of routinely agreeing to the terms negotiated by the manufacturers and the union, they refused to sign the contract, and instead demanded that the workers give back three holidays and other medical and retirement benefits.

This resistance from the Chinese contractors was unprecedented and everyone was in shock. It ignited a storm of debate in the community—everyone was talking about it at work, in the grocery stores, on the subway, and at home. Sentiment was overwhelmingly in favor of the workers fighting the contractors on their cutbacks of worker benefits. When the union mailed sign-up cards for a decent contract committee to all its members, several thousand members signed up.

One night I wrote an article for *Sing Tao Daily News*, the most widely-read Chinese community newspaper at the time. In the article I said that if the union called for a strike that this would be the right thing to do, and left my name and phone number. That night my phone ran off the hook, as dozens of workers called to say that they agreed with my position. One caller whose wife was a garment worker foresaw the drama that was about to unfold, citing a Chinese proverb, “*When fire singes the hairs on the skin of the women workers, they will rise up like tigers.*”

By this time I had worked in the industry for seven years and was the chief shop steward at Kin Yip Sportswear, a factory of 200 workers—the largest in Chinatown. My co-workers were furious about the contractors’ refusal to sign the contract, and one of them said to me, “Look at me, I’m 60 now and plan to retire

in a couple of years. I can't let these contractors take away my retirement benefits." They pressed coins into my hand and told me to call the union to tell its officers that we wanted to strike.

In the factory upstairs from us, the workers didn't even wait for the union to call for a strike—they were so worried about losing their contractual benefits that they staged a wildcat strike and appeared *en masse* at the union hall, saying they weren't going back to work until their boss signed the contract.

The union was beginning to realize that the workers in Chinatown had strong feelings about their union contract. My co-workers demanded that the union have a meeting about the contract, and about 100 of us took the subway uptown to meet with union officials. At the meeting the union officials did not promise to strike, but they did ask for our help in mobilizing for a rally, and looked a bit surprised when all of the women in my shop volunteered to pass out leaflets. The next day at 5 p.m., we all turned off our machines, picked up Chinese leaflets from the union's staff, and fanned out to different parts of Chinatown. For the first time the community was deluged with dozens of immigrant Chinese women with plastic shopping bags full of leaflets who were talking up a storm about the need to come to a rally.

A couple of days later one union staffer called to ask a few of us to be on a radio program that would be broadcast to most garment factories. My co-workers were very group-oriented, and they decided that if anyone was to go, the whole shop would, so we all turned off our machines and walked across Chinatown to the radio station which was located in an old tenement building. The stairwell was so narrow and there were so many of us that it seemed like the hordes had descended on the radio station. The station manager thought we were protesting his coverage of our labor dispute and started freaking out. After we calmed him down some of us stepped up to the microphone, and in very rough-hewn village dialects, expressed our feelings that the contractors were being unreasonable in not signing the contract, and called on other garment workers to come to the rally to support the union's efforts to secure a good contract.

Now that the rally was set to be held in Chinatown at Columbus Park on June 24, the union went into hyper-organizing mode. Dozens of members volunteered on phone banks, stuffed envelopes with letters to the members, and spoke to the media. An office in Chinatown was opened where staff and members wrote leaflets, painted banners, and held small meet-



Garment workers on strike, New York City's Chinatown, 1982.

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ings. One meeting was held at Cooper Union in the Lower East Side, where in 1909 ILGWU Local 25 heroine Clara Lemlich had rallied her co-workers to strike in the famous "Uprising of 20,000."³ It gave me goosebumps to know that we were meeting in the very same hallowed room on the verge of making the same kind of history, with the same local union and even the same number of workers.

On the evening before the rally as we were finishing preparations, a non-Chinese top leader of Local 23-25 suddenly asked me if anyone was going to show up at the rally. I looked at him in disbelief. With public sentiment running at a feverish pitch to strike, members engaging in wild cat strikes and pushing the union to take

action, and the union itself mobilizing to the max, how could he still doubt that the Chinese immigrant women would fight? Did he not feel the pulse of the masses? Not knowing how to respond, I simply replied with certainty, "Everyone is going to be there."

The next morning was a hot and humid New York June morning, but even so two hours before the rally was scheduled to begin, thousands of workers began streaming into Columbus Park, fanning themselves to keep cool and waiting patiently. By the time the rally began, there were nearly 20,000 Chinatown garment workers crammed into the park, all wearing union caps and carrying picket signs and banners. From the stage, union steward Mrs. Shui Mak Ka told the crowd that the contractors are "mistaking a fish eye for a pearl," and retirees club president Mr. Kai Bong Wong shook his finger in rage as he rallied the crowd to fight. A minister prayed for our success, and Jay Mazur declared that "We Are One!" After the rally the whole crowd marched through the streets of Chinatown.

It was an exhilarating moment. Thousands upon thousands of Chinese immigrant women garment workers had come together to stand up for themselves. This was a day I had dreamed for, and this rally proved that it could be done. We showed that we could do it not just to union officials, but to our community, our families, and ourselves. I was extremely proud to be a New York Chinatown garment worker that day, and that pride not only justified the many years of sacrifice and difficulties while organizing, but also carried me through many later years as a garment worker advocate.

The rally demonstrated the power of the union, and for the next few days the union began to break the bargaining impasse by ignoring the Chinatown contractors' association and instead getting individual Chinese contractors to sign pledges that they would sign the union contract. Most contractors signed pledges, but several dozen held out. The union planned another big rally at Columbus Park for June 29, and at the end of that rally any contractor who had not signed a pledge would be struck. Once again nearly 20,000 workers showed up at the rally, but within hours the few shops that were put on strike caved in and signed the pledge, and the strike was won.

Aftermath

The strike was a watershed moment for all involved. The most obvious lesson was that Chinese immigrant women do fight, and

their support for the union cannot be taken for granted. After the strike, Local 23-25's leaders devoted significant resources to improving its relationship with the Chinese membership. Bilingual staff was hired who energetically represented members' grievances, carried out shop stewards training, and acted as liaisons with the Chinatown community. Communication methods were strengthened, with every meeting and piece of correspondence translated into Chinese and Spanish, and Chinese newspaper articles on labor translated into English daily. Transportation between the union office and Chinatown was made easier with a free van shuttle. Services were greatly expanded, with more English classes, immigration paralegal work, and health services. An internationally-recognized model child care center for Chinatown members was set up a year later, something that particularly pleased my rank and file Committee members.

Not only did the union reach out to its own membership, it also became active in cultural and social issues inside the Chinese community. It turned out hundreds and sometimes thousands of members to participate in the Chinese New Year parade, protests against building a jail in Columbus Park and protests of the Chinese government's use of violence at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Union officials sat on important boards and commissions, and lent a strong labor voice to issues ranging from police brutality to economic development and community politics. As a result of these outreach efforts, the union became internal to the social fabric of the community

The strike also changed the community's understanding of the relationship between race, class, and gender. Before the strike the Chinese employers assumed that they could count on their workers to support them because of ethnic solidarity, and they probably assumed that as traditionally-raised women the workers would not fight Chinese men. But the 1982 strike demonstrated quite clearly that when labor issues are at stake, Chinese workers (both men and women) will act in their class interests, as they actually do in the factories when they fight for higher piece rates or have other disputes. However this does not mean that Chinese workers do not also act in their ethnic/racial interests under certain circumstances, as evidenced by their participation in community-wide protests against the building of the jail and Tiananmen Square violence. Therefore the key challenge for the union was how to represent both the class and ethnic/racial interests of its Chinese members, which would keep the workers

aligned with the union and prevent them from becoming aligned with the employers.

The 1982 strike was also transformative on a personal level for the women workers who became leaders in it. It had brought forward incredible women warriors like Shui Mak Ka and Alice Ip, firebrands whose speeches about worker justice would make any person quake in their shoes. Others like Mei Yin Tsang and Sing Kong Wong had notions of class justice ingrained from years of teachings in mainland China that lent important analytical perspective to our dialogue. And then there were members like the three Leung sisters, who answered every call to do whatever they could for the union because simply because they felt it was the right thing to do. If we ever had any doubts about ourselves as women, as fighters and as leaders, such stereotypes were now totally dispelled. Struggle had taught us that we were strong and capable, and that together we could do great things. We held up “more than half of sky,”⁴ according to historian Xiaolan Bao. Now the main challenge was to find a way to keep us together to build the voice of Chinese workers in the union.

To meet this challenge, I decided to go to work for the union. By then I had worked as a seamstress for eight years, but the strike had taught me that there were many staff at the union who shared my values and goals, and working with them might have greater impact on activating the Chinese membership than I would have as a steward in one of 400 shops. This was not an easy decision—my best friends in the factory didn’t want me to leave, and I had to take a substantial pay cut (my seamstress earnings were \$13,000 whereas the union only paid \$11,000 per year). Nevertheless the opportunities were intriguing, so I ended up working for Local 23-25 training shop stewards, hosting the union’s Chinese radio show, and managing its scholarship and child care selection projects.

One way that the activists stayed together was through the Local 23-25 Chinese Chorus. The ILGWU Chorus was famous for singing the *Union Labor Song* (Look for the union label....) on TV commercials in the 1960s, and we sometimes sang with them, but the Chinese Chorus became the ambassador group for Local 23-25, singing labor songs like *Which Side Are You On?* and *Solidarity Forever* in Chinese at Labor Day parades and various conventions. It exposed us to a variety of labor settings, but the chorus was not led by the women leaders themselves and they were not able to speak about various labor and community issues on behalf of its members.

So to consolidate the leaders of the strike and develop them to new levels of leadership, we formed the Chinese Committee of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), which was modeled after the Hispanic Committee of CLUW. We started with around 400 members and quickly became a pipeline for union leadership. Women who had never before led organizations, and would not get a chance to practice leadership in a union that was already full of leaders-in-waiting, now learned how to set agendas and have meetings, organize programs, raise funds, and manage relations among members. We participated in general union and CLUW activities, but also carried out our own community activities, such as getting petitions signed against police brutality, testifying for low income housing, and sponsoring clothing drives. Many CLUW leaders became union staffers and members of the local union's executive board. We called ourselves CLUW sisters, and we actually acted and felt like a sisterhood. We worked hard together, partied hard together, told secrets to each other, occasionally bickered among ourselves, and came to rely on each other. Union and community activism became a way of life that reached deep into our personal lives.

The strike also propelled some people to union leadership who might not otherwise have gotten there. Largely because of his success in leading the 1982 strike, Jay Mazur became president of the ILGWU after Sol Chaiken retired, and Edgar Romney became manager of Local 23-25. After a couple of years at Local 23-25, I became an organizer for the dressmakers local and the assistant director for the union's New York metropolitan organizing department, and several years later I became the district council manager in San Francisco and the union's first Chinese American international vice-president. However in my role as leader of San Francisco's largest union of Asian workers, a new challenge presented itself: how to assert the interests of Asian workers in the broader labor movement.

Asian workers had come to America in the mid-nineteenth century to build the railroads, and later to till the fields and develop information technology. Throughout history they have faced discrimination not just from employers who could get rich off their labor, but also from many labor unions who misguidedly believed that driving Asian Americans out of the labor market would benefit white workers. Some individuals, like George Wong of the Graphic and Communications International Union and Art Takei of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, strived for

many decades to gain respect for Asian Americans in the labor movement, even in the face of xenophobic union leadership. It was the dream of people like George and Art to have a national organization that would be a recognized and respected voice for Asian Pacific Islanders inside the U.S. labor movement.

An opportunity to fulfill George and Art's dream came in the early 1990s, when Asian labor leadership came to office in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Hawaii. AFL-CIO constituency groups for Blacks, Latinos, women, and many other groups had existed for many years, but none yet existed for Asians. Jay Mazur actively advocated for the AFL-CIO to support an Asian group, and I became head of the steering committee for the founding of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), and chaired its founding convention in 1992. Over the years APALA has trained over 100 young Asian activists to become organizers in the labor movement, advocated for progressive immigration policy, and participated in organizing political support for labor candidates throughout the country.

Epilogue

Today the garment industry has nearly disappeared from Chinatown. The old brick loft buildings that used to spew steam and echo of piece rate disputes have now been renovated to be high-priced offices and condominiums. Apparel manufacturing has moved almost entirely offshore and the union represents only several thousand apparel workers in all of New York City. The workers who participated in the 1982 strike have either retired or sought work as homecare workers or other service sector workers. A new generation of immigrants has come to Chinatown concerned with their immediate survival, and most of them are unaware of the seminal labor events that took place over a quarter of a century ago.

The garments that used to be manufactured in the U.S. are now mostly made in China. In the vast special economic zones of China's southern coast, millions of migrant women from the rural provinces work long hours for low pay in unsafe and unhealthy conditions. Like their industrial forerunners in New York they engage in many types of resistance, including work stoppages to settle piece rate disputes and sometimes bigger strikes. However unlike New York, most garment workers in China cannot count on a union to organize and defend them. Some are joining community-based worker centers that educate workers about their rights and assist them with their legal claims.

It would be easy to blame China for the global sweatshops of today, just as Sol Chaiken did in the 1970s. But the fact remains that it is apparel corporations that close down businesses in the U.S., leaving workers without jobs and means of survival, and sending work overseas where they can pay workers a tiny fraction of what they paid here. These apparel companies certainly need to be held accountable for their exploitation of workers, as the anti-sweatshop movement has sought to do by holding Nike, the Gap and others to codes of conduct.

But fundamentally, like that small shop in Oakland Chinatown in 1975, or the strike in New York Chinatown in 1982, only when the workers stand up and organize themselves will there be justice and lasting change. So unions need to organize workers in new global markets, and to create new labor relations systems (like the triangular bargaining structure of the past) that hold all employers to common labor standards and pass down wage increases through the supply chain to workers.

Leadership for unionizing garment workers will likely come from the global South. Unions in North America and Europe represent very few garment workers any more, and their focus is on sectors other than textile and apparel. On the other hand, apparel unions in Kenya organized 30,000 workers from 2000-2005, and unions in Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and many countries of the global South have mounted successful organizing campaigns involving international networks of supporters. A key consideration in organizing garment workers internationally will be the question of linking with workers in China. China is the largest garment exporter in the world, shipping more apparel than the next five largest exporters combined. It has more garment workers than any other country, and any plan to unionize this market must build ties with Chinese workers and unions. Currently American unions have no formal relationships with Chinese unions, so this would mean a significant shift in American labor policy.

To organize globally may sound daunting, and there is no question that much effort and many resources will need to be brought to bear on this effort. However if the story of the 1982 strike in New York Chinatown has taught us anything, it is that given the right conditions, "when fire singes the hairs on their skin," garment workers will rise up and fight for themselves. That was true in the Lower East Side in 1909, and in New York Chinatown in 1982. It will also be true in China some day.

Notes

1. For a more detailed explanation of this system, see Katie Quan, "Evolving Labor Relations in the Women's Apparel Industry," in *New Directions in the Study of Work and Employment: Revitalizing Industrial Relations as an Academic Enterprise*, edited by Charles J. Whalen (Northampton, MA and Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2008), 310-337.
2. For more on this organizing project, see Milkman, Ruth, "Organizing Immigrant Women in New York's Chinatown: An Interview with Katie Quan" in *Women and Unions: Forging A Partnership*, edited by Dorothy Sue Cobble (Ithaca, New York: Cornell ILR Press, 1993).
3. The "Uprising of 20,000" was a general strike of 20,000 European immigrant garment workers in New York City in 1909 that lasted for two months and resulted in improved conditions for sweatshop workers. Most of the workers were young women, and their courage and tenacity inspired other garment workers to use the general strike as a method of organizing other parts of the industry. See Louis Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union* (New York: Arno & The New York Times, 1969), 144-167.
4. Xiaolan Bao, *Holding Up More Than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948-92* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).