

To my sisters Sharon, Sandy, Virginia, and Patricia
and my brother Warren

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Add ravioli one by one. Stir with chopsticks to prevent sticking.

When soup comes to a boil, continue bubbling for 2 minutes. The ravioli are now cooked.

For this service for eight, I would suggest cooking only half the ravioli first, then remove from stock and cook the other half.

This is truly a magnificent dish, for just by merit of its decorations, you can boast of different varieties of won ton.

Top it with thin strips of Chinese roast pork and you have "cha siu won ton."

Top it with one piece of roast duck, one piece of cold chicken, 2 generous slices of roast pork and 1/2 a hard boiled egg, and you have "chop suey [literally, a mixture] won ton."

Top it with a nice juicy, fat leg of roast duck and you have "op duey won ton."

Garnish with curry, ketchup, and roast pork strips and you have "sam jup [literally, three flavors] won ton."

This is getting too strenuous for my appetite now, so may I bid you "Joy Geen" until we meet again!

(SOURCE: *Chinese Digest*, June 1938, p. 10)

Sue Ko Lee and the 1938 National Dollar Stores Strike "It Changed Our Lives"

In 1938, at the tail end of the Great Depression, 108 Chinese garment workers organized against unfair labor practices at Joe Shooong's National Dollar Stores sewing factory, forming the Chinese Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (LGWU) and going on strike for fifteen weeks. It was at that time the longest strike in the history of San Francisco Chinatown. Their hard-won victory was due as much to their determination to win as to the economic and political circumstances of the depression that nurtured their union activism. The Wagner Act of 1935, which granted organized labor the right to collective bargaining, had resulted in the greatest organizing drive in the history of the labor movement. Large numbers of racial minority and women workers were recruited into unions for the first time. Thus, with the support of white labor unions and the rise of leftist organizations in Chinatown, Chinese women were encouraged to stand up for themselves and work across generational, racial, gender, and political lines to improve working conditions in Chinatown.

When I began researching Chinese American women's history in the early 1980s, there was only one in-depth article about the strike, written by Patricia M. Fong in *Asian American Review*, a publication of the Asian American Studies program at the University of California, Berkeley.¹ Although it was well researched and provided many details on the garment

1. Patricia M. Fong, "The 1938 National Dollar Strike," *Asian American Review* 2, no. 1 (1975): 183-200.

industry in California, the causes behind the strike, developments during the fifteen-week strike, and the aftermath of the strike, the author relied exclusively on English-language materials from newspapers and the union archives. There were no Chinese voices. And the conclusion—that the garment factory and union gained more from the strike than the workers—troubled me.² I was determined to interview the strikers and get the inside story. In particular, I wanted to know from their perspective: What led up to the strike? What sustained the strike for so long? What role did the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) play? More important, what role did Chinese women play in the strike and how did it change their lives?

It was difficult finding anyone involved in the strike to interview. Finally I located Sue Ko Lee, who was a buttonhole machine operator at National Dollar Stores at the time of the strike and who afterward became a labor organizer for the ILGWU. Over tea and gingersnaps in her kitchen one sunny afternoon, I interviewed Sue about the events. She was seventy-nine years old and retired, living alone in a comfortable house in El Cerrito, California. I found her to be a quiet, soft-spoken person, though occasionally my line of questioning would provoke an angry or spirited response or two. This happened when I asked her about Joe Shoong (owner of National Dollar Stores), Jennie Matyas (ILGWU labor organizer), the debate over the strike settlement, the significance of the strike in her opinion, and the reason she left labor organizing. While transcribing the interview, I noticed that I had repeatedly tried to put words into her mouth—to have her tell me that the garment workers had not been used by the union, that the women had played an active role in this strike, and that, as a result, their lives had changed dramatically. But Sue Ko Lee had a mind of her own. At times, she would nod in agreement and not elaborate further. Other times, she would contradict me with justifiable reasons. As an example:

JY: Why were all the officers of Local 341 [Chinese Ladies' Garment Workers' Union] Chinese men when the women members outnumbered the men?

SL: The men were not as afraid as the women at that time. (I didn't say

2. Specifically, this is what Fong said in the conclusion: "Who received the most satisfaction from the outcome? Probably the ILGWU, the National Dollar Stores Ltd., and the Golden Gate Manufacturing Company. The workers were (sold out by the union?) dissatisfied with the terms of the contract, and they all lost their jobs within two years, and the union could not really help them much afterwards" (ibid., p. 196).

all the men were not as afraid.) They were [the] decision makers. [Women] didn't want to assume the responsibility. (I won't want to assume the responsibility at that time either.) They had families and they just [went] out and work to earn a little extra money.

JY: Even though the men were the officers and leaders, did the women participate just as actively in the strike as the men?

SL: (nods)

JY: Did they have a say in the decision making?

SL: Oh, sure.

JY: Did the women speak up during the meetings?

SL: Not too much, but they understood the issues. They [just] weren't use to speaking up and taking the leadership role.

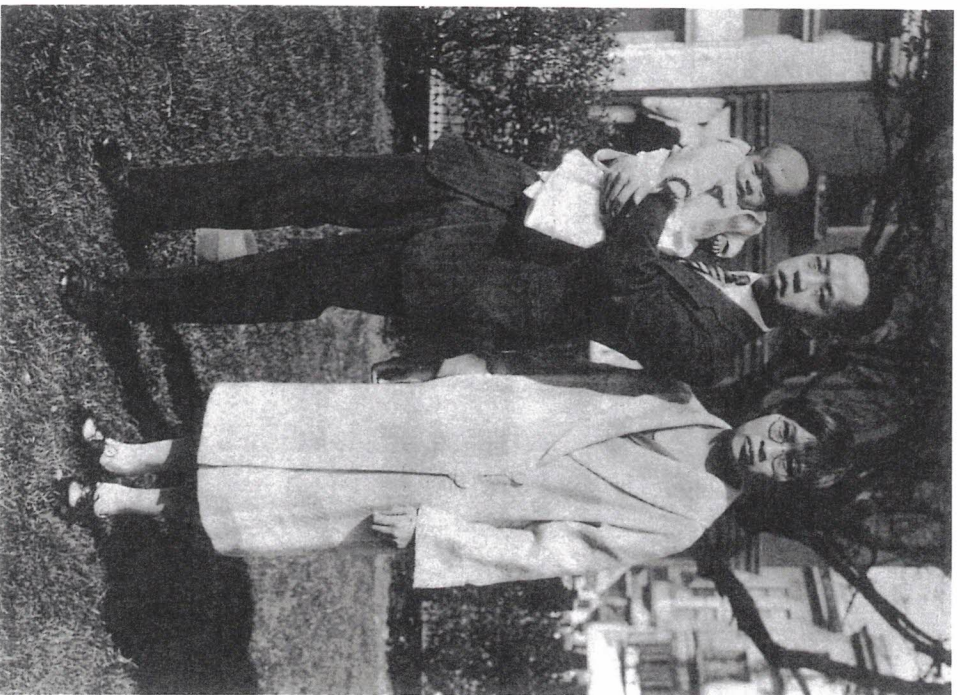
I appreciated her honesty and I was grateful to have found someone willing to talk to me about the strike. So you can imagine my delight when, without my prompting, Sue Ko Lee produced her scrapbook of the news clippings, newsletters, bulletins, and photographs she had kept in connection with the strike and her work with the ILGWU. With her permission, I have included a selection of these news articles and bulletins following her interview.³

Sue Ko Lee was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on March 9, 1910, and grew up in Watsonville, California, the eldest of ten children. At eighteen, she married Lee Jew Hing, who had immigrated to the United States in 1921 and was working as a bookkeeper at National Dollar Stores. They made their home in San Francisco Chinatown, where they had two sons. Soon after their marriage Sue Ko Lee found a job at the National Dollar Stores, and before long she was embroiled in a strike that would irrevocably change her life.

"We Weren't Bad Off"

Did you know almost everyone had to work for Joe Shoong's Dollar Stores? Because you couldn't get out of Chinatown and work anywhere

3. In 1995, with Sue Ko Lee's permission, I deposited the scrapbook in the Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University, for safekeeping and the use of other researchers.



Sue Ko Lee with her husband, Lee Jew Hing, and son, Stanley, in 1930. (Courtesy of Sue Ko Lee)

else. You either worked in a laundry, restaurant, or your own barber-shop. Women got into [it] because there were no other opportunities for them [except] pick shrimp at home. There weren't too many employers. All my family worked for Joe Shoong . . . all my brothers, my sister Mary, even my brother-in-law. It was [also] a matter of family connections. My husband got his job because his uncle was working for Joe Shoong.⁴

4. Joe Shoong emigrated from Chungshan (Zhongshan) District, whose people controlled the garment industry in San Francisco Chinatown. The tendency was for employers

In those days, as long as there was a machine empty, anyone could get a job since they didn't pay union wages and it was piece rate. There were no controls until Roosevelt came in.⁵ We come in and go as we liked. There was no set time. They opened until nine at night. I didn't see any sweatshop conditions there. The National Dollar Stores was clean and a good-size factory because they made all the things that were sold in their [retail] stores, simple things like flannel nightgowns, cotton housedresses, aprons, satin bloomers, all women's clothing. The factory was well lit. It was not in the basement but above ground with windows that opened on one side. Only the cutting room and rest rooms were downstairs.⁶

I started learning on the most difficult machine—the over-lock with three needles. It worked over the seams that were trimmed off on the inside of the garment. I learned all the special machines. My husband had a steady job and was making \$125 a month [as a bookkeeper]. I was averaging 25 cents an hour or something like that. I wasn't a very fast worker or a slow worker, just an average worker. And I couldn't work full time because my children came in 1927 and 1929. At \$125 a month and with rent at \$35 a month, we weren't bad off. We never had to live in places with community kitchens and all. [Did you make enough money to take care of expenses?] Yes, and enough for him [her husband] to send money home to his family [in China]. They never forget that, no matter how hard things got.

"Wages Was the Main Thing"

I wasn't in the beginning of it [the strike]. I was working there, but I wasn't involved until later. You see, they [the union] came to organize us. The white shops were already organized, and the white shops were clamoring that the contractors were sending work out to the Chinese workers and that was a thorn [in their side]. So they had to organize the

to hire people from their own districts; thus, workers like Law Shee Low (see pages 211–23) and Sue Ko Lee who were from Chungshan easily found jobs at the National Dollar Stores factory. However, the kin relationship made it difficult for workers to protest any labor exploitation or mistreatment.

5. She is referring here to the National Recovery Administration codes, which provided workers with set minimum wages, hours, safety standards, and collective bargaining rights.

6. The National Dollar Stores factory specialized in women's light apparel for exclusive distribution to its thirty-seven retail outlets on the West Coast. The factory was known for being the largest, cleanest, and most modern garment factory in all of Chinatown. Joe Shoong was a millionaire and generous philanthropist.

Chinese to counteract that [underbidding of Chinatown shops]. They tried and tried but they couldn't break the [racial] barrier until Jennie Maryas came.⁷ She was talking to people there, and that's the time I became aware of it. They had to get enough signatures from the workers for the local before they could present it to the employer to have a union.

[Did you sign up?] I must have, although I can't remember now. You see, in each shop, they get the cutters first because if they don't cut, you don't have any work. We had a group meeting to talk about it.

[Was there a dispute over wages?] Yes, wages was the main thing. The depression was over and the hour wage laws were in effect and we weren't getting the thirty-three-and-a-third cents an hour. They were cheating on us. The hours were not kept legally. What they did was say what you earned was [based on] how many hours you worked to make the thirty-three-and-a-third cents.⁸ And there was already a home work rule, but they were [still] sending a lot of home work out. (My husband knew because he kept the records of that.) I think that was the incentive for the workers to join the union of their own will. The employer[s] definitely said they didn't want a union.

After the majority of the workers voted for a union shop, establishing the Chinese LGWU under the ILGWU, National Dollar Stores sold the Chinatown factory to Golden Gate Manufacturing, a new company formed by two former managers of the National Dollar Stores. Seeing this move as a subterfuge to freeze them out and break up the union, the Chinese LGWU voted to call a strike and began picketing the National Dollar Stores factory and its three retail stores in San Francisco. Their demands were recognition of a union shop, \$20 wages for a thirty-five-hour workweek, and a guarantee that National Dollar Stores would buy all its manufactured goods from Golden Gate and that Golden Gate would provide work for a minimum of eleven months of the year to its workers.

7. Jennie Maryas was a dedicated socialist and labor organizer for the ILGWU. For her life history and her memories of the 1938 strike, see "Jennie Maryas and the ILGWU," oral history conducted in 1955 by Connie Gilb, Regional Culture History Project, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1957.

8. No one else mentioned the "doctoring" of time sheets. Sue Ko Lee may be confusing this illegal practice from later years with what was going on at the National Dollar Stores factory at the time.

"We Were Determined to Close Them Down"

[How were you able to keep the strike going for fifteen weeks?] We organized our shifts, and the ones on the picket line were all together. We never mentioned anything about why we are doing this. What is there? Maybe they won't reopen the shop for us? There was no other recourse. There was nothing else. We were determined to close them down if necessary.

We all did it with the Chinese leadership and advice from the top because we didn't know anything. They had to tell us what to do. The men were not as afraid as the women at that time. (I didn't say all the men were not as afraid.) They were [the] decision makers. My husband was the vice-president and wrote all the bulletins that went out in Chinese. [Women] had families and they just [went] out to work to earn a little extra money. They didn't want to assume the responsibility. (I won't want to assume the responsibility at that time either.) They [women] weren't used to speaking up and taking the leadership role but they understood the issues. When you see a woman like this (*points to a picture showing an older Chinese immigrant woman picket*) on the picket line, isn't that something? They struck in there too.

[Who was running the strike?] We all worked on the [picketing] schedules and all, but the legal stuff, they [ILGWU] had to do it for us. Everything had to be okayed by the officers of the [international] union because they might be liable and they were footing the bill. [With] the support of the white people, the union people, we closed the downtown [retail] store.⁹ I don't know what we felt then. Certainly, Jennie Maryas made a difference.

[Can you tell me why Jennie Maryas was so effective with the Chinese?] She's not Chinese, but she's a woman. She's very dedicated and very honest and sincere. (Now you read about the corruption in the unions. I don't think you could corrupt her.) She really wanted to help us. I think it was also the large company [National Dollar Stores] that people did not like. I remember we were on the picket line and here came

9. The ILGWU not only took care of legal matters, but it also conducted the negotiations, provided relief monies, sponsored English classes for the workers, and sought the sanction of the San Francisco Labor Council and cooperation of the Retail Department Store Employees' Union. Only when the white retail clerks refused to cross the picket line at the three local National Dollar Stores, thus closing down the retail outlets for two weeks, did Joe Shooong feel compelled to deal with the strikers.

Mrs. Shoong and she said, “*Ni di sui tong yan* [these awful Chinese]!” So she’s not Chinese, right?¹

[Did you get any support from the Chinese Six Companies?] Of course not! They were against us. We had the whole Chinese community against us. They didn’t do anything, but they didn’t show us any support because we were all called troublemakers. It was unheard of! [But] we knew the union was behind us. The union would come by with donuts and coffee in the morning. Then we went back to the union hall for meetings. [What were some of the difficulties during the strike?] Survival. We got the strike benefit—five dollars a week, but that won’t pay your rent. Thirteen weeks, that’s three and a half months.¹⁰ If we got any help, it was borrowing from our relatives. I don’t know how we managed. But when you’re young, you don’t think about these things.

[At any time was there any disagreement between the union and the workers?] Not until the time of the contract agreement. Jennie was trying to get them to accept it, and some of the militant workers were against it. It just wasn’t good enough for them. And I said, at least that’s something to begin with. And that’s when she [Jennie Maryas] noticed me. It may not be what you wanted, but you take the best there is. At least you got something for one year. And maybe something better would come out of it. If you take longer, people are not going to stand around here. They can’t afford to.

The contract called for a closed union shop; a 5 percent raise (to \$14 per week except for apprentices); a forty-hour workweek, with time and a half for overtime; a paid holiday for Labor Day; enforcement of health, fire, and sanitary conditions; guaranteed half-day of work whenever workers were called in; a shop steward authorized to collect dues and deal with grievances; the right to a hearing before an arbitration committee in the case of a dispute over the contract or a questionable discharge; a price committee to step in whenever piece rates did not yield the minimum wages for 75 percent of the factory workers; and an agreement that National Dollar Stores continue contracting work to the Golden Gate Company. The vote was close: thirty-one for the agreement, twenty-seven against. Workers went back to work a few days later. But

10. The strike actually lasted 105 days, or 15 weeks, from February 28 to June 8, 1938.

when the contract expired one year later, the Golden Gate Manufacturing Company conveniently went out of business.

“The Best Thing That Ever Happened”

They closed the factory while we were picketing. Then because we picketed the downtown stores, they sold it [the factory] to Golden Gate and disengaged themselves from the main store. The contract said they had to stay open a year, so they stayed open a year and then closed it.

[What happened to everyone after the factory closed?] A lot of them went to work for white shops because the union found them jobs. You don’t know how hard Jennie Maryas worked to get us into the white shops downtown. I heard this later: Edna was a presser. She didn’t have any parents and she and her sister lived alone. So Jennie tried to place her, to get her into a white shop. The employer was willing, but the workers rebelled. They didn’t want any Chinese because of the reputation that the Chinese will work for nothing and cut the wages down. Finally she got Edna in and she proved her worth. And after that, the door opened and employers began asking for Chinese workers. That’s how the Chinese workers got out of Chinatown to work elsewhere. And that’s the turning point for workers in Chinatown. Because of the garment workers’ strike in Chinatown, everything changed. Later, the restaurant workers had shorter hours, days off. In my opinion, the strike was the best thing that ever happened. It changed our lives. We overcame bigotry, didn’t we? The war came and that helped because there was a labor shortage. But even if it hadn’t come, we would have still broken the barrier. Otherwise, we would have still been stuck in Chinatown working among our own race.

I know it was a turning point in my life. My husband went to work in a downtown shop [as a cutter] in clothes and suits. I worked the machines for a while in the little shops, and then Koret took over and that’s how I got into quality control. I had a tape measure around my neck to make sure the button holes were spaced out [correctly]. (Koret had very good standards for their workmanship.)

[What was the main difference between working in Chinatown and in a white shop downtown?] You made more money and had set hours. You didn’t jump in and out of the shop. You worked eight to five and there was holiday and vacation pay. It was still piecework, but the price had to come up so that you made your minimum. It’s controlled that way. So



Sue Ko Lee (second from the right) with co-workers in the 1940s. (Courtesy of Sue Ko Lee)

the faster ones can make more, but at least the slowest ones made the minimum. During the trial period they paid to make up the difference in order for you to make the minimum, but after the trial period, if you can't keep up, they have a right to let you go. But in Chinatown, they just cut your hours on the records. I remember there was a fire in one of the little shops I was working for, and because they had insurance I was paid for staying home. If it was a Chinese shop, you would get nothing. Then through the union bargaining, we got health insurance and death benefits. [Did they mistreat you in any way?] No, I won't let them. We had no problems getting along with the people in the shops. There was no discrimination. Where I worked I was respected. I'll just cite you a few instances. I was working on the floor at Koret during the Second World War.¹¹ A co-worker told me another woman working the floor got a raise. "You go ask for a raise," he said. On another occasion, I was on the floor trying something on the machine, tucking. I didn't like that job, but I was willing to try any machine. Most people won't because if they went

11. A floor person took care of the workers, including the distribution of work to them.

slow, it would lower their average. So this lady came to me and said, "Why didn't you tell me you can work on that machine?" I said (*smiling smugly*), "You never asked me."

Later in the 1950s, I stopped working at Koret and went to work for the union [Local 101 of the ILGWU]. It started with the strike. I was working in the shop and was drawn into it.¹² They needed someone with language skills, so I was appointed the business agent. That's when I became a delegate to the convention.¹³ [Was there any racial discrimination in ILGWU?] No. I was secretary of a *white* union. There were Blacks in there too, and we all got along. After the war [ILGWU was successful in getting other shops in Chinatown to unionize] because they worked through the manufacturers. If you send your work out and you're a union shop, you have to send it to a union [factory]. That's how they organized them. Otherwise, they would never be able to organize them and they won't strike. At least they [Chinatown workers] gained something. They never had death benefits and health insurance before. Now they have.

In a way the Chinatown shops are good for the people who cannot get out of Chinatown transportation-wise or know their way around. But the contractors are so greedy. You know the manufacturers pay them the price and overhead on top of the piece rate but they don't pass that on to the workers. Just like in real estate, they hurt their own people. And here these employees feel sorry for their employers. They give them the sad story, "You run through this at this price or we don't get any work." I know for a fact that the manufacturers pay them the same rate as they pay downtown and pay them for the overhead. But they're not happy with the overhead; they have to cheat the workers.¹⁴ That's what gets me disgusted! That's why I got out of it. I could have just gone along with it and take my pay. I would have been rich by now. But I can't take that out of the dues of the people. I'm not that kind of person.

12. According to Sue Ko Lee, after the Golden Gate factory closed and the ILGWU was able to place workers in white shops, the Chinese ILGWU disbanded and Chinese garment workers began joining Local 101.

13. Under Jennie Matyas's mentorship, Sue Ko Lee became secretary of both Local 101 and the San Francisco Joint Board. She was a delegate to the 26th National ILGWU Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1947.

14. Then and now, Chinatown garment shops have had to underbid downtown shops to get work. Unfortunately, owners make up for it by downsizing their employees' wages. More recently, there have been efforts to hold manufacturers accountable for working conditions in contract shops and to form alliances among manufacturers, contractors, and organized labor in order to compete globally without undermining decent working conditions.

I thought maybe I could help Chinatown, but I couldn't do it. (*sighs*) It's frustrating. They [Chinese workers] don't want to do anything for themselves. They want you to hand them the benefits, and still they won't fight for them. It's not like the Black people, [who are] more aggressive. Your mother is at the age where she can't understand it, but those younger ones, they should know better.¹⁵ I tried to explain to them, but they just don't want to change. So I said what's the use of me hanging around? I can't do anything. So that's why I quit the union in the 1960s and went to work for the state in the employment service.

(SOURCE: Sue Ko Lee, interview with author, October 26, 1989, El Cerrito, California)

Sue Ko Lee died of cancer on May 15, 1996. The last time I saw her was on October 28, 1995, at the book party for Unbound Feet. Proudly sitting on stage at the Chinese Culture Center in San Francisco Chinatown, she was one of seven outstanding women being honored that day.

FROM SUE KO LEE'S SCRAPBOOK

In a light-brown-covered scrapbook Sue Ko Lee had carefully arranged and preserved an array of English- and Chinese-language newspaper clippings, mimeographed pages from union publications, handwritten Chinese bulletins, and photographs—all documenting the 1938 strike and her ILGWU activities. From them we get a detailed account of an intraethnic class struggle and the tactics employed by both sides—the Chinese garment workers and their employer, millionaire Joe Shooong. At stake were the reputation of Joe Shooong, on the one hand, and the rights of Chinatown workers to unionize and demand better working conditions, on the other. Both sides vied for the support and approval of the Chinese community, appealing to its sense of righteousness and to Chinese nationalist solidarity.

15. During the interview I told Sue Ko Lee about my mother's experience working in union shops in Chinatown from the 1950s to the 1970s. She felt so beholden to her employers that she was willing to "doctor" her time sheets and be paid piece rate and below the minimum hourly rate. Many other women did likewise because they felt obligated to their employers or were afraid of losing their jobs. Also, because of their cultural background, Chinese women, even today, are more apt to cope by accommodating rather than confronting; on the latter point, see Chalisa Loo, "Slaying Demons with a Sewing Needle: Gender Differences and Women's Status," in *Chinatown: Most Time, Hard Time* (New York: Praeger, 1991), pp. 188–211.

As the following excerpts from bulletins, news clippings, and newsletters show, Joe Shooong went to great lengths to fight the union, demanding an election of the workers, changing the ownership and name of the National Dollar Stores factory, getting a court injunction against the pickets, suing the union, and finally closing down the factory when the contract expired. In the National Dollar Stores' "Statement to the Public" of March 2, 1938, Joe Shooong tried to come across as the benevolent employer, upstanding citizen, loyal Chinese nationalist, and victim of union tactics. In response, the Chinese local provided a reasoned point-by-point rebuttal that was published simultaneously in the Young China newspaper, arguing that the workers were victims of Joe Shooong's mistreatment and unscrupulous tactics. Over and over again, the Chinese ILGWU issued bulletins that explained the union's position to the Chinatown community. These were often couched in leftist political rhetoric—labeling Joe Shooong a capitalist, arguing that the worker's welfare is the nation's welfare, and calling on workers to fight to the end to raise their living standards. The union even went so far as to join forces with leftist organizations such as the Chinese Workers Mutual Aid Association.¹⁶

The excerpts from union publications show that throughout the strike the Chinese garment workers were determined to win. In the spirit of union solidarity, they kept fellow union members apprised of the situation, continued to bolster the membership's morale, and constantly expressed appreciation for all that the ILGWU was doing for them. They apparently really felt that "the ILGWU is behind us; we shall not be moved." Even after the strike was over and victory won, they remained stalwart members of the labor movement and avid supporters of Chinese nationalist causes. In the September 21, 1938, bulletin printed below, they expressly made the connection between U.S.-China foreign relations and interethnic workers' solidarity, urging all of Chinatown not to cross the picket lines at department stores downtown "for the sake of national reputation and of promoting friendship between Chinese and American workers." Later, the Chinese local also contributed to the strike fund of other unions, campaigned against anti-labor legislation, participated in the protest against U.S. shipment of war materials to Japan, and supported the boycott of non-union-made hosiery stockings, which women wore in order to boycott Japanese silk products. Unfortunately, Chinese

16. The Chinese Workers Mutual Aid Association was established in 1937, following a successful strike against the Alaskan Packers Association, to unite Chinese workers for the purposes of improving working conditions and raising their status in labor unions.

women's involvement in the labor movement proved short-lived as the movement dissipated with the coming of war, the end of the depression, and the repression of the left following World War II.

A LETTER TO THE PUBLIC REGARDING THE STRIKE

Dear Fellow Countrymen:

Why are we striking and picketing? We are striking for better wages from the factory owner so that we can support our livelihood. This is not something that we want. However, since last October, because of inflation, we have had difficulty making ends meet. That is why we mobilized our fellow workers to fight for equality and decent wages. It has been three months since we formed our union. During these three months, we have tried repeatedly through peaceful methods to negotiate with the owner, but he has consistently used the oppressive tactics of the capitalist to stall for time. He forced us to have an election in the presence of his representatives to rectify the formation of the union. Supervised by the National Labor Relations Board and with a full quorum of workers, the election was carried out and our union received due recognition. Subsequently, his legal representatives signed an agreement with our union lawyer, but he continued to use all kinds of stalling tactics to defuse our unity. Then on top of that, he tried to turn the situation around by changing the name of the factory. His goal is to break our ricebowl. Therefore, we have no choice but to set up a picket line to fight for fair treatment.

February 26, 1938

All the workers of the National Dollar Stores factory

(SOURCE: Handwritten Chinese bulletin. TRANSLATOR: Ellen Yeung.)

A STATEMENT TO THE PUBLIC REGARDING THE DAMAGES DONE TO BUSINESS BY THE CHINESE LGW STRIKE AGAINST NATIONAL DOLLAR STORES

Beginning February 26, the Chinese Ladies' Garment Workers' Union has been sending its members to picket our stores on Market Street, Mason Street, and Fillmore Street as well as our warehouse. The damage

this is doing to our business, however, is not as significant as the impact it has on the whole overseas Chinese community. Our company had on February 8 sold the factory located at Washington and Kearny to the Golden Gate Manufacturing Company. That company had received State government approval to establish itself as a business and had also published a notice in the newspaper to raise capital by soliciting shareholders. Not only is their name different from ours, but their organization is different. They have absolutely no relationship with us. As for the negotiations going on between labor and capital, when the factory changed hands the Golden Gate Manufacturing Company agreed to continue the negotiations with the union. And instead of pursuing the matter with them, the union turned around and picketed our company. The union is in error for not being able to tell the difference. Moreover it is a great pity that they are hurting a Chinese business. Our company has always extended cooperation and excellent treatment to the workers. We have always adhered to government regulations regarding work hours and wages and have never oppressed anyone or reduced anyone's wages. Therefore these workers of the Golden Gate Manufacturing Company are totally out of line in picketing us and distributing flyers in the name of the workers of a non-existing National Dollar Stores factory in order to confuse the public. In this time of national disaster, when unity among ourselves is crucial, it is really sad to think that such an unfortunate incident has happened. Because we are concerned that our countrymen may not know the truth, we are providing a brief explanation so that you may understand that we are the innocent victim in this dispute.

National Dollar Stores
March 2, 1938

(SOURCE: *Young China* newspaper, March 5, 1938, p. 4. TRANSLATOR: Ellen Yeung.)

ANOTHER LETTER TO THE PUBLIC FROM LOCAL 341, THE CHINESE LADIES' GARMENT WORKERS' UNION

Yesterday we read the ridiculous statement from the National Dollar Stores. It is not even worth a response from intelligent people, but because we are concerned that our countrymen may not know the truth, we are providing a brief explanation of the oppression suffered by members of this union.

According to National Dollar Stores, "Beginning February 26, the Chinese Ladies Garment Workers Union (LGWU) has been sending its members to picket . . ." Our sending members to picket National Dollar Stores was not really something that we wanted to do, but because of the low wages, the inflation, and the downward spiral of living standards, we had no choice but to raise the issue of a wage increase with the owner of National Dollar Stores. Instead of responding, the owner evicted four union members from the factory. After the attorney and the officers of the union took up the matter, the owner reinstated the four workers to their original jobs and recognized the Chinese LGWU.

At first he agreed to open negotiations with the union regarding wages and working hours. Then he reneged on his words and refused to recognize us, demanding instead that the workers vote in an election supervised by the National Labor Relations Board. The majority voted for a union, so finally the representative and the legal counsel for National Dollar Stores signed a document recognizing the union and agreeing to start negotiations over wages, working hours, and other issues. In the latter part of January, National Dollar Stores scheduled a meeting with our union representative at the Palace Hotel, at which time our union representative presented their company representative with a copy of the contract. Representatives and legal counsels from both sides also met on January 28 at the union attorney's office to sign a document stating that the National Dollar Stores factory was now a union shop, meaning that it cannot hire non-union workers. In the midst of negotiations, National Dollar Stores resorted to trickery, suddenly changing the name of the factory. They refused any further negotiations with the union but continued the talks about wages and working hours under the name of the Golden Gate Manufacturing Company. Meanwhile, Golden Gate Manufacturing Company refused to provide any satisfactory responses and instead stalled for time. Work at the factory became unsteady. That was why union members were forced to strike.

National Dollar Stores said that they have "always extended cooperation and excellent treatment to the workers . . . have never oppressed anyone or reduced anyone's wages . . ." When workers ask for a wage increase from the employer and the latter evicts them, is that not oppression? Where in this case is the excellent treatment? When the National Recovery Administration (NRA) codes were in effect, weekly wages were at least \$18, \$19. After the NRA codes expired, wages were slashed to \$13.30, a reduction of \$5.60. How can the employer claim not to have reduced wages? All this constitutes oppressive treatment of workers by the employer.

National Dollar Stores also said, "In this time of national disaster . . ." If the owner of National Dollar Stores is really interested in China's welfare, he should negotiate with the workers in good faith and allow workers to make a decent living so that they can afford to buy Chinese war bonds. We can barely survive on \$13.30 a week, let alone contribute to the war effort. If the owner of National Dollar Stores is someone who is understanding, then he should negotiate with the union and raise the wages of the workers. Then not only will the workers benefit, but China will as well. We trust that wise people in the community will be able to judge for themselves as to who is right and who is wrong in this present dispute.

March 5, 1938

(SOURCE: *Young China* newspaper, March 5, 1938, p. 4. TRANSLATOR: Ellen Yeung.)

TO THE MEMBERSHIP OF OUR ILGWU

The Chinese article on the opposite page is a letter written by our Chinese strikers to our membership. The underneath is a translation of it by Alice Dong, a striker.

April 30, 1938

Dear brothers and sisters,

We, the members of the Chinese Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, Local 341, send our greetings to you all, and wish to bring to your attention the existence of our strike, now more than nine weeks old.

Ever since the end of last year, after we were granted our charter, we tried our utmost in every way to get an agreement from our employer, the National \$ Stores Ltd., to assure us higher wages and better working conditions. In reply to our demands, our employers asked for time to consider the terms. Meanwhile, pending negotiations, the name of the factory in which we were working was changed from the National \$ Stores Ltd., to the Golden Gate Mfg. Co., and our employer claimed the factory was sold.

When we heard of the sale of the factory we believed at the time, and still do believe now, that such a sale is only a means used by our employers to break our unionization and to avoid further responsibilities toward

us. The strike was called February 26, and we started immediately to picket the factory and the three National \$ Stores in San Francisco.

We continued to picket peacefully for three weeks until the firm obtained a temporary restraining order against us. This prevented us from picketing the stores. The hearing on the temporary injunction was held on April 12, '38. We did not as yet get our decision, but we sincerely hope that when it comes it will be in our favor so that we shall again be able to picket the stores, as we now picket the factory.

We appreciate deeply the help and the assistance that all the officers of the San Francisco locals, and Miss Jennie Matyas, our organizer, are giving us in our strike. We take this opportunity to thank them all and individually.

We also thank our headquarters, the ILGWU, in New York City, for all the support extended to us: moral support, economic support, legal support, and financial support. Every week a relief sum is handed to each of us to take care of arising needs. Legal advice is given readily whenever troubles or complications happen. With such supports behind us, we know we cannot fail. We will fight our fight to the end, and hope to raise the living conditions not only for ourselves but for the other workers in Chinatown as well.

Words cannot express our gratitude. All we say and sing forever is:

"THE ILGWU is behind us
We shall not be moved."

We thank you all for the nice Easter party given to us and to our children, also.

Strikers of Chinese Ladies' Garment Workers' Union
Local No. 341

(Source: *Union Bulletin*, May 1938)

ILGWU LOCAL #341, CHINESE LADIES' GARMENT WORKERS' UNION BULLETIN

Dear Fellow Workers and Union Members:

Our request to the owner for a wage increase, reduction in work hours, and improved treatment not only failed to get the owner's sympathy and consent, but instead caused him to reveal his villainess and treachery. First

he pretended to recognize the union and negotiate a contract in good faith. Then he changed the name of the factory in an effort to avoid further negotiations with the union. Then under the new name he tried to draw up a contract with the clause stipulating that "National Dollar Stores and the new company are not responsible." He would open the factory only one or two days a week, thus using economic pressure to intimidate the workers. Fortunately, our workers stood together and maintained a united front.

On February 26, the head of our local chapter mobilized all workers to begin picketing the National Dollar Stores factory and its three retail stores in San Francisco. That was two months ago. Then in the middle of March, while we were picketing, the owner obtained a temporary injunction from the court which stopped our picketing at the retail stores, but not at the factory. We are now waiting for the judge's final decision. We hope that the judge, who should be like a father to us, will base his judgment on law and justice, allowing us to resume picketing in front of the three retail stores so that we can continue our long-term struggle for justice from National Dollar Stores.

During our struggle, we have been lucky to have the backing of our New York headquarters, including material and moral support as well as financial, promotional and legal assistance. Dear workers, we must struggle on. No matter what happens, we must fight to the end, so that the support from our New York headquarters will not be in vain. We also hope that you members in all the other local chapters will help to publicize our situation in your areas and continue to give us your moral support.

Happy May First [International Workers Day].
Chinese Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, Local #341
May 1, 1938

NOTICE REGARDING THE STRIKE BY EMPLOYEES AT THE EMPORIUM

The Japanese invasion of China has brought about a national unity of such magnitude as has never been seen before. While the common people in China are sacrificing for their country, we overseas Chinese, besides giving financial assistance, should try actively to lobby through diplomatic channels for support for China. Our intense efforts have gained

us the sympathy of all kinds of American workers and have generated a lot of moral and material support. However, we have not attained our goal of stopping the loading and unloading of Japanese goods and the shipment of weapons and ammunitions to Japan. In order to succeed, we need to work harder from now on to strengthen the bond between Chinese and American workers.

Recently, because of economic strife, workers at the Emporium, Woolworth, and a dozen other stores went on strike and began picketing the stores. Since we are not directly involved, we do not have a stake in which side is right or wrong. However, as long as the dispute is going on, we Chinese should not cross the picket line and enter any of the stores to shop so as not to give American workers a bad impression of us. Our Chinese community does not lack wise people who understand the implication of all this. However, there is always that small minority, who, for the sake of saving pennies, would cross a picket line to patronize a store. For the sake of national reputation and of promoting friendship between Chinese and American workers, we publish this notice hoping to call everyone's attention to the present situation.

Chinese Workers Mutual Aid Association

Chinese LGWU

September 21, 1938

THE CHINESE LOCAL EXTENDS GREETINGS

The following is a translation of the Chinese Greeting on the opposite page, which besides being in our Bulletin, was distributed among a thousand Chinese workers in Chinatown. The Chinese, as well as the English translation, was written by the Chinese members, themselves.

"We greet the New Year with new hopes. A year has passed since our local was organized. In the last year we won our first strike for union recognition, and better wages. Our strike lasted 105 days. We owed our success to the solidarity and determination of our members to fight 'to the end' to raise our living standard.

"We are grateful to our International for the fullest moral and financial support which it gave us so generously. We are grateful to the S.F. Joint Board and their officers for their generous help, also.

"We are also grateful to Local 1100 for the full support they gave us in our strike.¹⁷ We shall never forget it.

"We enjoyed the privilege of a union shop for over half a year, and we wish the rest of the Chinese garment workers were with us. With the beginning of the new year, we hope that they will realize, as we have realized, that a union will help them win better living conditions in all Chinatown.

"We greet everyone of our friends in the ILGWU, and wish you all a happy and prosperous new year."

Chinese Ladies' Garment Workers' Union
Local No. 341, ILGWU

(Source: *Union Bulletin*, January 1939)

17. Local 1100 was the Retail Department Store Employees' Union, whose members refused to cross the picket lines at the three National Dollar Stores retail outlets, thus closing down the stores for two weeks.