

# Made in China, woman to woman

## Factory workers there begin to press for rights

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Pun Ngai and Yang Lie Ming traveled halfway around the globe to introduce union organizers in Boston last week to China's quietest labor movement: The Chinese Working Women Network.

A tiny group of academics and former migrant workers, the network runs a women's center and a roaming health van at the edges of China's massive industrial zones in Shenzhen, near Hong Kong.

In China, Pun and Yang counsel migrant women who work 12 to 16 hours a day in factories, carefully keeping within the bounds of China's official policies.

In Chinatown, they swapped stories with longtime Chinese-American community activists over tea, discussing in Cantonese their battles over minimum-wage issues, fair overtime pay, problems with worker compensation claims -- and fear. They spoke of informing workers about health and safety risks and their rights under Chinese law, and publishing stories written by young migrant women -- but never encouraging illegal action, which could result in the group being shut down, Pun said.

"When you grow up in the countryside from age 16 to 18 everyone wants to go to the city, but by the time they are 25, they're sent home worn out," said Pun. "We're hoping labor in the US can teach us something about organizing and also help us increase pressure to make a change."

Both 35, the women come from vastly different backgrounds. Pun is a professor at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Yang is a former factory worker turned labor organizer. "I, and a lot of people here, were really surprised to hear that people are doing similar sort of work in China," said Karen Chen, an organizer with the community group China Progressive Association. "You see the same sort of issues here. My parents went through it when they immigrated here. They had to choose between a job and bad conditions or the fear of being blacklisted if you stood up for yourself."

In Roxbury, Pun and Yang discussed factory conditions at a working lunch at the Service Employees International Union Local 2020, meeting a small group of textile, laundry, and health and safety union leaders.

There, members drew comparisons between China's sweatshops and the conditions at Massachusetts mills and factories at the turn of the century.

"This was the first time we've ever met Chinese activists doing grass-roots organizing -- it struck me how dangerous the work is that they do," said Jennifer Doe, a workers rights organizer for Massachusetts Jobs With Justice. "It's a political issue anywhere women try to organize unions."

If it seems ironic that two Chinese activists are seeking support from US labor movements committed to preventing job losses to places like China, Pun and Yang were determined to highlight the common goals.

Tolle Graham, a health and safety trainer with the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health, felt Chinese labor activists deserve the support of US unions to slow overseas job flight.

"For a long time those of us in labor said only buy USA-made, but now we say we are in an international community. If their conditions don't get better in China we are lost, too," says Graham. "We recognize job movement to China is the way things are going, but we may be able to hang onto some jobs if there's a level playing field in terms of conditions."

The network's work is to convince rural migrant workers to take the risk of following China's own labor laws and fighting to improve working conditions. Those laws are not being enforced by the government and regulation is left up to companies, said Pun.

"I do believe that China has very good labor laws. The problem is companies will not always comply with the laws," said Pun. "We really can't wait for them to do so."

Pun was introduced to China's harsh factory conditions when she researched her thesis by working in an electronics factory in Shenzhen. For six months she shared the long workdays and crowded conditions living in a guarded workers' dormitory with rural migrants.

She founded the Chinese Working Women Network in 1996 after visiting workers badly burned in a factory fire.

Yang was one of the factory workers who found the Pun's women's center a second home when she worked in a Shenzhen factory. After three hours of stopping by the center and volunteering, she was hired as an organizer.

"I've met a lot of Americans who have an interest in what happens in China. It's hard for people to understand the conditions," said Yang. "There's hope, but we see unless you have a struggle, nothing will ever change."