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LRR Voices: Organizing Immigrant Asian Workers

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Abstract
Ho Nhu Lai came to the U.S. from Vietnam in 1975 and began work in a food processing plant. He was shop steward for UFCW Local 271 and is now an International Representative for the union's Western Region staff. Ho is also on the Board of Directors of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance. He spoke to Labor Research Review on the importance of cultural understanding.

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Ho Nhu Lai—Organizing Immigrant Asian Workers

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With all the different cultures, different ways of life, different way of thinking, social structure, family dynamics, language barrier—it makes it difficult to communicate with and organize the Asian immigrant workers.

Fundamental for an organizer to succeed is the ability to communicate with the workers in their own language and also to work with their community in every level—to understand culture and custom. Like all immigrant workers who come to America, Asians often find exploitation and discrimination because of the language barrier. But they don't understand labor unions.

Immigrant workers often times are economically, culturally, and socially used by the employers. They're skillful at using fear and intimidation to keep the workers isolated and unorganized. Community and family supports are crucial in breaking through the fear and intimidation.

When I make home calls to immigrant Asian workers, I will not only talk to them, but I have to—I want to say it again—I have to talk to their family. If the worker is a woman, then I better find out if she's married, then I have to go talk to her husband. If the worker is a young person, then I have to definitely talk to their parents about the union.

Now I would like to give you some idea about cross-cultural understanding between the West and the East. It's important to remember that I am talking about Asians who have only been in the United States for a short time—not those who have grown up here or whose families immigrated generations ago. The Americans, as in the West, have an individual orientation. The individual
believes he is the best judge of what is good for him. The state exists to serve him, not the other way around. But in the East (I'm talking about Asians), collective orientation, saving face, not bringing shame to oneself or one's family in order to maintain honor is most important. Another example, in the West young people are encouraged to challenge and question teachers or old people as evidence of independent thinking. But in the East the young people or student will not challenge teacher or old person, authority, out of respect.

And now you can see why it is so important for an organizer working cross-culturally to understand the immigrant workers' cultures and customs.

In one of my campaigns, the workers were mostly Vietnamese, only arriving in the U.S. three years ago. They don't understand about unions. I have to make the connection to the family and community and educate the whole community about unions. Unions do not only benefit wages in the workplace, but are a community service. I try to gain their trust, work with issues that relate to the union agenda. I've even helped with the income tax, especially with the earned income credit for poverty-level families. This is part of community education.

The community has to see that the union isn't only for services. I tell them that they have to be able to commit themselves to wanting to help themselves. The Union is the tool for them to achieve what they want.

When they learn about the union and join, they are the strongest people you ever see.