

BUILDING THE CHINESE WORKERS NETWORK

A Pathway to Empowerment and Inclusion
in the Greater Toronto Area

The Chinese Workers Network (CWN), was founded in 2012 to address the key question of building labour power in Canada's largest urban centre. Since Indigenous people gave this place its name Toronto, generations of immigrants and refugees have come here seeking a better life. The majority of Toronto residents were born outside Canada, and the majority are racialized. Many newcomers live in their own ethnic communities and have built up local ethnic economies that are parallel to mainstream society.

For the labour movement to thrive, it must organize workers from all those communities. The CWN modelled an approach to integrating Chinese-Canadian workers into the labour movement and addressing the unique challenges faced by racialized workers in a changing economy. In doing that work, it was breaking new ground while continuing the historic journey of those who came many years before.



以工會為榮



A statue stands at the foot of the CN Tower that pays tribute to the 17,000 labourers brought from Guangdong province in China to help build the Canadian Pacific Railroad through the mountains to the Pacific Ocean in the 1880's. Over 700 were killed, and thousands more injured under treacherous conditions. When the 100th Anniversary of the CPR was announced, the Chinese-Canadian community mobilized and demanded recognition of the sacrifices of those early pioneers. The monument was finally erected in 1989.

Instead of being honoured for their toil that ensured the future of this country, those workers bore the brunt of deeply racist attitudes expressed first through a head tax of \$500 on any relatives they tried to bring to Canada, and then in 1923 with

the Chinese Exclusion Act, that barred Chinese immigrants for 23 years until its repeal in 1947.

Far from being victims, the Chinese migrant labourers were the pioneers of a labour movement borne out of self-organizing from the margin. From 1916 to 1920, Chinese workers formed their own unions, including the Chinese Labour Association, the Chinese Railroad Workers, Chinese Canadian Labour Union, Chinese Canadian Shingles workers' Union and Chinese Restaurant Workers Union. They organized strikes demanding wage and benefit parity with white workers and made substantial gains, shattering the long-held stereotype of Asian workers being docile, passive and anti-union. The demands for fairness, dignity and respect fought for by these early pioneers a hundred years ago remain the motivating force for Chinese Canadian workers across all sectors to join a union. The same sense of militancy and justice prevails today.

Once immigration laws were changed in 1967, new generations arrived from Hong Kong and the mainland. Soon they found themselves organizing to challenge discrimination and workplace injustice.

Leaders began to emerge in different sectors - the garment industry, hospitality, and public sector unions. As immigration expanded, Chinese Canadian workers became the fastest growing demographic of the working class in greater Toronto. Chinese Canadian labour and community activists worked closely with Black and other racialized communities in a shared vision of dismantling systemic barriers that divide and weaken working people. That included being part of the Alliance for Employment Equity, advocating for equitable hiring and harassment-free workplaces.

A significant anti-racism struggle was spearheaded by Wei Fu, a security officer in Queen's Park Legislature and a member of OPSEU. In 1983, Wei

Fu filed a human rights complaint against his supervisor for racial harassment. Thirty labour and community groups formed an ad hoc committee in support of Wei Fu and his case led to changes to human rights law in Ontario.

Inspired by the creation of the Asian Pacific America Labor Alliance (APALA) in the United States and the work of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, the Asian Canadian Labour Alliance was formed in 2000 and included a number of Chinese Canadian activists.

With the influx of newcomers under the family reunification and point system immigration policies, the community was able to sustain 3 daily Chinese language newspapers – Sing Tao, Ming Pao and World Journal. In 2000 workers at Sing Tao Daily News joined the Newspaper Guild Local 87 (now Unifor) It took a determined strike to win a first contract, but their victory inspired others to action. Winnie Ng, was key supporter of the Sing Tao strike as the Ontario Director of the Canadian Labour Congress.

In 2003, the Labour Council formally adopted a comprehensive Equity Agenda to shape a more inclusive movement, and proceeded to more intentionally engage workers of colour in all aspects of its work. Daniel Yau was brought on staff to reach out to the Chinese community. He organized forums for non-union immigrant workers to tell their stories and call for improved labour laws and made sure that labour's message was being carried in Chinese-language media.

But 2003 was also the year of the SARS epidemic and because it originated in China, fear of being near someone who might be infected sparked a backlash against Asian-Canadian residents and businesses. Labour Council decided to challenge that sentiment by holding the annual Day of Mourning event on April 28th at the Monument

to Chinese Railway Workers, to remind everyone that Chinese workers had helped build Canada for over a century, and that labour stood for solidarity instead of exclusion.

The Labour Council's first Aboriginal/Workers of Colour Conference in 2003 provided an important space for union activists from diverse communities to come together and imagine a more powerful, inclusive labour movement. Their recommendations helped shape an intentional approach by Canada's largest labour council to deeply involve workers of colour in every aspect of its work. A number of affiliates explored what that would mean in their sector.

In 2004 the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 353, recognized the challenge many immigrants had in obtaining practical skills and experience to qualify for certification in the electrical trade. Local 353 attempted to get government funding to run special courses, but when that did not happen the Local decided to run a course at their own expense to help Chinese workers acquire the necessary "Canadian experience", and to encourage them to get involved in organizing non-union contractors. With the support of the union, the Chinese Association of Electrical Workers was formed.



IBEW 353 member with family showing benefits of working union

In 2005, the Hotel Workers Local 75 helped launch a continent-wide effort to raise standards and wages in the hospitality sector. One of the key spokespersons in that historic fight was Helen Liu from the Royal York hotel. She had been a music teacher in Shanghai, but in Canada became a hotel cafeteria worker and one of the strongest leaders in the movement to raise standards for hospitality workers.

At the same time Local 87, now part of the Communications Energy and Paperworkers (CEP), continued organizing media workers. In 2006, World Journal newspaper unionized, and in 2010 Ming Pao workers voted for a union. It took a long strike led by Simon Sung to win a first contract at Ming Pao, but Toronto became the only city outside of China with three unionized Chinese-language daily newspapers. Ming Pao workers marched in the Toronto Labour Day parade with a banner in Chinese that proclaimed “Unions Make a Better Life”, and KH Wong was elected Secretary-Treasurer of the local union. In the same year over 600 employees of Yee Hong Nursing Home in Scarborough joined SEIU Healthcare, followed soon after by a successful drive at Mon Sheong Care Centre.

EXPLORING THE HONG KONG AND CHINA CONNECTION

In the first decade of the 21st century, trade with China grew dramatically. The Canadian Labour Congress established solidarity ties with the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), the only independent central labour body affiliated with ITU. In North America there was an ongoing debate about how to relate to workers in mainland China who were striving to win an authentic workplace voice. A wave of wildcat strikes had swept across manufacturing plants in southern China, and the government realized

it needed to accommodate the pent-up anger or risk losing control of much of the industrial working class.

Winnie Ng played a fundamental role in connecting unions in Hong Kong with Canadian counterparts, while the official mainland All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) started reaching out to unions in other countries. ACFTU regional bodies looked to develop relationships at the local level, and the federation in Guangzhou invited the Toronto & York Region Labour Council to send a delegation to China.

The delegation in December 2010 included leaders from CEP Local 87, UNITE HERE Local 75, CUPE Local 79 and the Labour Council. It went first to meet with HKCTU and the China Labour Bulletin, then on to Guangzhou to meet with labour scholars and other local ACFTU affiliates. The visit was a remarkable learning experience for the entire delegation and opened a dialogue on how to undertake solidarity with the Chinese workers' struggle for labour and human rights. But when Xi Zhenping became the President in 2013 the dynamics changed. The short-lived experiment of independent labour action was shut down by the new government leadership, and the opportunity for authentic dialogue with unions in China receded – a precursor to the repression that rolled out in Hong Kong soon after.



Winnie Ng leading delegation at Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions

CONVENING THE NETWORK

In early 2012 Jennifer Huang came to work for the Labour Council as a campaigner whose role included outreach to the Chinese communities in greater Toronto. She discovered that many unionized Chinese members often felt uncomfortable in traditional union halls and meeting spaces where union culture has its own norms. A new staff person at the Labour Community Services, Olivia Liu, started meeting with the Chinese Inter-Agency Network, and soon they coordinated their efforts. Jennifer recalls those dynamics:

“If labour is to build power politically, it was puzzling to me that labour was consistently communicating its values of social and economic justice primarily in English when a huge majority of

workers – including union members – don’t speak it. It seemed only common sense to me that in order to build a working-class movement, we need to include racialized immigrant workers who are a huge section of today’s working class.

The CWN was building trade union consciousness and pride within immigrant Chinese union members as part of a wider strategy of building political power. We began to invite these members to Chinese-language events where we did education work about the importance of unions, demystified union structures and explained how members could get involved in their local unions.”

In April 2012, Labour Council hosted a dinner where forty Chinese Canadian union members met to plan a multi-year strategy to reach out to the growing Chinese Canadian community



曾偉傑
多市行政管理局
國際鋼鐵工人工會
(USW 1998)



余華英
調查員
聯邦公務員工會
(PSAC)



麥遠光
殘障人士專用公屋司機
聯合公屋員工工會
(ATU 113)



常元傳
社會工作者
加拿大公共行政員工工會
(CUPE 79)



林春勝
電機技師
國際電機技師工會
(IBEW 353)



何綺華
文員
安省公務員工會
(OPSEU)



伍雲錦
酒店員工
國際酒店及餐館
員工工會
(UNITEHERE Local 75)



鄧慶英
車廠員工及保安教練
加拿大汽車工人工會
(CAW)



黃嘉恒
記者
加拿大通訊、能源
及紙張員工工會
(CEP Local 87M)



Dianne Chin
教師
多倫多小學教師工會
(ETT)



Paulina Szeto
護士
安省護士工會
(ONA)



田之欣
工程師
能源專業人士協會 /
國際專業工程師工會
(IPPE Local 160)

尊重 + 談判力量 + 團結

【工會的好處 - 對你工作的尊重】

- 每一個沒有工會的工作場所都有一個共同點，就是經理們可以橫行霸道欺凌你、懲罰你或者不理會你的重要關注，而你卻有口難言或無能為力。
- 你勤奮工作，你該得公平薪酬、周年加薪以及工作保障，這關乎尊重你的工作。工會內集體談判，每次皆會帶來更佳的結果。工會員工比較非工會員工平均賺取更多，這就是「工會好處」。

【怎樣在工作場所成立工會？】

- 你怎樣取得尊重和更大談判力量？參加工會，團結員工是最直接的方法。

怎樣成立工會？辦法如下：

- 如果有最少百分之四十的員工(不包括經理)簽署保密的工會卡，政府勞工廳將舉行一項不記名



矗立在多倫多市中心，用來表揚華工對加拿大貢獻的鐵路華工紀念碑，不單只讓我們認識到他們所遭遇的不公平對待，更讓我們明白到工人需要團結起來，組織工會保護權益的重要性。

投票，徵詢你是否想要工會。倘若過半數的投票者表示「贊同」，工會便正式獲認可成立，公司是永不能找出誰人簽卡或投票支持成立工會。

- 下一步，代表各員工的談判小組會與工會專業談判人員合作，與公司管理層商討訂立一份工會合約。
- 一份工會合約將包括尊重、公平待遇、薪酬和福利的所有保證，它是具有法律效力，工會是會用法律及其他組織途徑來保障及執行你的權利。

【一個工會是你的民主選擇】

- 僱主是不能因員工籌組、支持或討論工會而予以解僱或處罰，此乃非法，安省勞工關係局是不容許這樣的事情發生。
- 僱主是不能蔑視員工選擇成立工會的民主決定，拒絕公平地和以誠懇態度去進行談判。對於不公平和不真誠的談判，勞工關係局會將一份公平的工會合約，強加給公司，作為懲罰。



Amy Lee
個人護理服務員
國際服務行業員工工會
(SEIU)



譚子南
演員
加拿大演藝員工工會
(ACTRA)

加入工會 融入主流 • 真正改變 真正改善

with a positive message about unions. Coming from many different unions, working in various occupations, they agreed to help craft a campaign in Cantonese and Mandarin to show how union values reflect the needs and interests of the entire community. The newly founded Chinese Workers Network saw the opportunity to be more active in their own unions, help others join unions and build community power. A steering committee was formed with Liyu Guo and Kingsley Kwok of OPSEU as co-chairs.

Labour Council material was soon translated into Chinese, and a concerted effort undertaken to identify Chinese-Canadian members of every union. A lapel pin was created bearing the words “Proud to be Union” that was worn with pride by a growing network of activists. Soon, a regular e-blast was being written in Chinese and sent to hundreds of labour activists.

MESSAGE FROM LABOUR COUNCIL

紀念第一波外勞鐵路華工的意義

在過去的加拿大國慶日，很多團體在多倫多參加了紀念鐵路華工的儀式，回憶他們對團結加拿大的貢獻。每年很多人都以燒烤、野餐和放煙火來慶祝國慶，但是，紀念1863年來加拿大的第一波外勞鐵路華工，為建鐵路的犧牲，最終使加拿大得以擴張，不單只對加拿大華人，對所有加拿大都是十分重要的。

多倫多及約克區勞工議會和加拿大亞裔勞工聯盟的代表，向鐵路華工紀念碑獻上花圈並致詞，表示勞工運動會繼續為移民和外勞爭取及改善權益，正如，1885年的人頭稅、1923年的排華法，以及2012年新的勞工法和移民法，用新方法拒絕了臨時外勞的權益和像樣的工作條件。就好像當年鐵路華工修建鐵路竣工後被拒絕申請居留一

樣，今日，臨時外勞被要接受低工資，和當他們的工作簽證到期，被拒絕申請居留。

達到社會公正才是真正的紀念鐵路華工和慶祝國慶。改革勞工和移民法，以保護我們社區弱勢和被邊緣化的一群是很重要的。

LEARNING EVERY STEP OF THE WAY



In June 2012, workers at contractors for Rogers Cable TV who had joined CEP went on strike to win a first contract. The majority were Chinese-Canadian and as labour ramped up support for their strike they secured an agreement. An organizing setback occurred when UFCW was unable to win a drive at Loblaws-owned TNT Supermarket Warehouse, after the previous owner intervened. Labour realized that it needed to deepen connections with the community in a variety of ways. In November, the Labour Council and UFCW hosted a booth promoting union issues at a Night Market in Markham. Chinese language material was developed and shared by the Labour Council.

The CWN became a stepping stone for Chinese union members who felt unconnected and

strangers in their unions. This realization spurred the CWN's efforts to create a welcoming space that would encourage member participation and engagement. The CWN initially fostered connections through cultural celebrations like the Lunar New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival. These events served as a platform for building community and solidarity, bridging the gap between workers and the labour movement. The CWN's Steering Committee emerged from these gatherings to formalize the group's mission and objectives:

Critical Discussions on Labour Issues: The network aimed to convene discussions on pressing topics such as living wages, affordable housing, and childcare. By highlighting these issues, the CWN sought to empower workers and promote a collective understanding of their rights.

Advocacy for Labour Laws: The CWN's advocacy efforts centered around improving labour laws and employment standards, addressing the unique challenges faced by immigrant workers who may lack knowledge of their rights.

Union Organizing Support: The network provided guidance and resources for Chinese workers interested in organizing their workplaces, fostering a culture of solidarity and collective action.

Social and Economic Justice: The CWN endeavored to build coalitions that promoted social and economic justice, recognizing the interconnectedness of labour rights and broader social issues.

Leadership Development: A crucial aspect of the CWN's mission was to empower Chinese union members to take on leadership roles within their unions, ensuring that their voices were represented in decision-making processes.



Outreach Efforts and Community Engagement

In 2013, the CWN sponsored its first Lunar New Years dinner. It combined the event with a presentation by Kent Wong of Los Angeles, founder of APALA, and a media training session for Chinese-language union activists. To reach the Chinese community effectively, the CWN implemented a series of outreach initiatives, including participation in night markets and Chinatown community events. Collaborating with unions such as the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) and CUPE 79, the CWN set up booths to disseminate information on workers' rights and campaigns such as "We Own It," which opposed the privatization of public assets. Over multiple days, the CWN booth exposed the broader community to the advantages of having a union and workers rights.

The CWN held various education workshops in Chinese-dense neighbourhoods like northern Scarborough, either at public libraries or schools on a variety of subjects: Elections 101; Know Your Union, Health and Safety, as well as education forums. Sometimes these workshops would precede the programs of Lunar New Year banquets.

Recognizing the need for timely and effective communication with the Chinese ethnic media, the CWN organized media skills training workshops to equip Chinese union members with the tools to engage with media on labour issues. The workshops, facilitated by journalists (members of Unifor 87M), provided participants with practical insights into media interactions, enabling them to articulate their perspectives confidently. This initiative addressed a critical gap, as many workers felt unprepared to represent their views in public forums.



While older members possessed the language skills necessary for media interviews, they

often lacked the confidence to advocate for social justice. In contrast, younger members demonstrated a strong commitment to social activism but struggled with language barriers. The CWN responded by offering Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) classes every Saturday morning, empowering a younger generation of activists to engage in the labour movement effectively.

Advocacy for Labour Rights

The CWN has always focused on labour rights and worker organizing, including participation in the 2016 Ontario Changing Workplace Review. In partnership with Fairchild Radio, the CWN produced four episodes addressing labour issues, amplifying the voices of Chinese workers and highlighting the shortcomings of existing labour laws. Liyu Guo, Co-Chair of the CWN, spoke about the state of Ontario labour laws and its impact on Chinese workers. The CWN's delegation at public inquiries underscored the network's commitment to addressing systemic inequities, particularly concerning temporary work agencies which target ethnic minorities.

In 2017, the CWN launched the "In My Workplace" podcast, featuring 20 episodes of stories from Chinese workers across different sectors. This project not only provided a platform for sharing struggles and triumphs but also served as a resource for workers seeking to improve their conditions. Funded by United Steelworkers, UNITE HERE Local 75, SEIU Healthcare and Unifor, the podcast exemplified the CWN's dedication to grassroots organizing and community empowerment.

Political Advocacy

The CWN's efforts extended into the political arena, where it played a pivotal role in supporting labour-friendly candidates during elections. In the 2014 Toronto municipal election, the CWN helped Manna Wong to win the trustee seat over the incumbent. Kingsley Kwok, Co-chair of the CWN, explained this approach: *"It is imperative that labour begins to organize in these ethnic spaces because just looking around the ridings of Scarborough Agincourt or Scarborough North, you can see that the majority of residents living there are people of colour and who may not speak either of Canada's official languages."*



Kingsley Kwok speaks at the Chinese Railroad Workers Memorial on July 1st, 2016

In 2019, the CWN held a press conference with Chinese ethnic media urging the provincial government to drop its plans to take over Toronto's subway system. Partnering with TTCriders and CCNC Toronto, the CWN leveraged its platform to advocate for public transit as a social good. It also partnered with Scarborough Agincourt Trustee Manna Wong to hold an education forum on the impacts of the education cuts and wrote an open letter to Chinese parents asking them to oppose the education cuts.

Media Engagement

The rise of social media, particularly WeChat, became a critical tool for the CWN to engage with the Chinese community in the GTA. As traditional media channels often overlooked the concerns of immigrant populations, the CWN recognized the need to establish a presence on platforms familiar to these communities. Successful digital outreach by Conservative politicians underscored the importance of timely and culturally relevant communication.

In response, the CWN proposed developing labour-friendly content on WeChat to counter misinformation and promote union values. With support from various unions, the CWN launched its WeChat initiative in late 2019, coinciding with significant labour negotiations with the teacher and education unions. This strategic move aimed to build rapport with the community and promote worker-friendly and labour-friendly values on social media.

As part of the effort to help teacher and education unions, the CWN helped organize a Chinese press conference in early 2020 where Chinese media were invited to hear from frontline education workers. The success of this press conference led to OMNI Mandarin and OMNI Cantonese anchors inviting the CWN to be interviewed for their prime-time newscast. Going directly to the ethnic media with worker-centered stories helped members of these unions feel empowered about having their stories heard; and helped the Chinese ethnic media feel included by labour.

REBUILDING AFTER THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to the CWN's operations, forcing a temporary halt to many initiatives. But after the crackdown on democracy and unions in Hong Kong, Brother Lee Cheuk Yan, General Secretary of HKCTU was jailed under the National Security Law. The CWN piloted an outreach project responding to the influx of newcomers from Hong Kong. This initiative identified urgent needs such as labour rights education and career development. The outreach project reached over 3500 participants through social media and in-person workshops.

In 2024 the CWN resumed its annual Lunar New Year celebration. It was the largest ever, drawing over 400 attendees including newly elected Mayor Olivia Chow as a special guest. One of the keynote speakers was Lily Chang, a CUPE 79 member who attended the first CWN event years earlier, joined the Labour Council Executive and was part of the delegation to Guangzhou. In 2023 she was elected to the second-highest union position in the country - Secretary-Treasurer of the Canadian Labour Congress.

Conclusion

The Chinese Workers Network has emerged as a vital force in the labour movement within the Greater Toronto Area, addressing the unique challenges faced by Chinese workers and advocating for their rights. Its success helped spark the creation of other diverse Workers Networks by the Labour Council, in the Filipino, Tamil, Somali and Ethiopian/Eritrean communities. Some became influential and helped win key campaigns, others wound down with the onset of COVID. But the CWN has survived and thrived, and through community engagement, educational initiatives, and strategic outreach has built a strong foundation for future organizing efforts.

As the labour landscape continues to evolve, the CWN's commitment to inclusivity and social justice remains a guiding principle, ensuring that the voices of all workers are heard and valued. The CWN not only represents the interests of Chinese workers but also serves as an example for the broader labour movement, emphasizing the importance of organizing creatively and in non-traditional spaces. As the world moves into a time of deep uncertainty and the dramatic rise of xenophobia and hate, the need to build and sustain solidarity among all workers in the world has never been greater.

Co-authored by Tai Pang Liu, Jennifer Huang and John Cartwright 2025



"I was always proud to be Chinese and proud to be a trade unionist. Through the CWN these two identities came together in a way that inspired me to step up to leadership."
Lily Chang