

Oi-Kwan “Annie” Lai’s Story

Read Oi Kwan “Annie” Lai’s story. If you don’t know a word, guess what it means or skip it. Underline sentences that you have a strong reaction to (for example, something you strongly agree or disagree with, or that makes you angry, or surprises you).

I started sewing when I was 17 or 18. I worked in the garment industry in Hong Kong until I immigrated to Canada in 1979. Then I sewed for a French company in Montreal. At that time it was easy to come to the U.S. and apply for a green card. So that’s how I ended up over here.

I started working in Chinatown garment factories right away. . . . When I first came to Chinatown, I really didn’t like it. In Canada the boss was already giving me seven dollars an hour [Canadian]. He paid by the piece, but if you didn’t sew fast enough, he would give you seven dollars anyway as the minimum. But I exceeded that so I could usually make about eight dollars an hour. Every year in the summer we got off two weeks vacation and also two at Christmas. Canada also has a five-day workweek. After coming over here, I thought about how life had been before in Canada. Oh, I really didn’t like it here!

. . . I feel like these last few years have been the worst, the hardest. Because all these undocumented . . . people are coming, and they will just work day and night because they have to pay back the money they owe for their fares. The bosses especially exploit them. When we go to work at nine and leave at seven the boss is not all that happy that we’re working a short number of hours. I see so many [undocumented] people working until nine or ten o’clock at night. They still don’t want to leave. So, the boss likes those undocumented workers more and doesn’t like us because he knows they’re so vulnerable. They’re very young – some have left their children behind in China – and now we’re older. We can’t work those kind of long hours. We have families here. Even getting off at seven, by the time you get home it’s eight-something.



Discussion Questions

- Where is Annie from? What kind of work does she do?
- What was her work like in Canada?
- Where does she work in the U.S.?
- What happened in the last few years in Chinatown?
- What does Annie say about undocumented workers? Why do they work hard?
- Why do bosses like them?
- Do you know any workplaces where something similar happens?
- Read aloud a sentence you underlined and discuss it with others in class.

Story from *Sweatshop Warriors* by Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, available at <www.southendpress.org>. Adapted with permission from Auerbach, Elsa and Nina Wallerstein, *Problem-Posing At Work: English for Action*. Edmonton: Grass Roots Press, 2004.