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DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

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High School Lesson Plan on
New York Chinatown's Immigrant Garment Workers & Labor Activism (1970–2001)

Georgia Social Studies Standards

SSUSH22: Analyze U.S. international and domestic policies including their influences on technological advancements and social changes during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations.

SSUSH23: Assess the political, economic, and technological changes during the Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations.

SSCG7: Demonstrate knowledge of civil liberties and civil rights.

SSCG16: Analyze the difference between involuntary and voluntary participation in civic life.

The transformation of Manhattan's Chinatown in the late 20th century was closely tied to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Hart-Celler Act). Before 1965, Chinatown remained a small, aging "bachelor society" shaped by decades of Chinese exclusion policies. The new law replaced discriminatory immigration quotas with a system emphasizing family reunification and skilled labor, leading thousands of Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China to settle in New York during the 1970s.

These newcomers arrived during a period of economic crisis, as New York City faced manufacturing decline and urban disinvestment. Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs transformed vacant commercial spaces in Chinatown, SoHo, and TriBeCa into garment factories, revitalizing the city's struggling apparel industry. By 1980, nearly 500 small garment shops operated within this immigrant-based economy.





However, these factories reproduced many challenges that had existed in the garment industry for generations. In the early 1900s, immigrant workers—especially Jewish and Italian women—had organized major labor movements, including the 1909 Uprising of the 20,000 shirtwaist strike. The 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, which killed 146 workers, led to stronger workplace safety laws and expanded labor protections through organizations such as the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU).



By the 1970s, many Chinatown garment workers faced similar conditions through a subcontracting system that allowed major clothing brands to avoid direct responsibility for labor practices. Contractors relied on piecework pay, long hours, and repetitive section-based production. Many workers, especially immigrant women with limited English skills, experienced low wages, unpaid overtime, and unsafe conditions.

In 1982, Chinatown garment workers organized one of the largest labor demonstrations in Lower Manhattan's history. When contractors refused to renew union protections, organizers including May Ying Chen, Connie Ling, and Alice Ip mobilized more than 20,000 Chinese immigrant women. Through social unionism—a strategy connecting workplace rights with community support—they demanded fair wages, healthcare, childcare, and immigrant protections. The strike succeeded, forcing contractors to accept the ILGWU agreement.





The victory demonstrated that immigrant women were not passive workers but powerful leaders capable of reshaping labor movements. However, globalization soon transformed the industry again. Trade liberalization, outsourcing, rising rents, and the decline of domestic manufacturing led to the collapse of Chinatown's garment economy by the end of the 20th century.

Today, the lessons of the 1982 strike remain relevant. Global fast fashion supply chains and gig-economy jobs often rely on systems that shift risk onto workers. The organizing strategies developed in Chinatown—community solidarity, bilingual advocacy, and linking labor rights with immigrant justice—continue to influence modern worker movements across the United States.

Complete Article and Lesson Plan

Photo Credit:
(Top to Bottom, Left to Right)

1. Glick, Robert. Chinatown Garment Factory Floor. c.1979-1984. New York City, New York, United States.
2. Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Aftermath. March 25, 1911. New York City, New York, United States._
3. Garment Workers March. 1982. New York City, New York, United States.
4. Lee, Corky. Women Supporters at Rally. 1982. Chinatown, New York City, New York, United States.

Contact us at info@aaved.org

History is the context of "**now**", "**why**", and "**how**".

Teach interwoven history.



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