

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

May Chen

Chinese American labor and union organizer

“What matters most to me then and now is to make a better world for family, friends, immigrants, and workers.”

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FIGURE 1 COURTESY OF APA INSTITUTE AT NYU

Background Information

Born: October 3, 1949

May Chen was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts. She is a first generation Chinese American. Her parents were immigrants from Hong Kong and China. She received her bachelor's degree from Radcliffe College. She later earned a master's degree at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Resistance

May Chen joined various resistance movements in college. She was a member of the Chinese Student Association and participated in both women's rights and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations.ⁱ After college, Chen taught Asian American studies at California State, Long Beach. Through her educational work, she noticed that Asian women had few available childcare options. A combination of cultural attitudes about women working, and anti-Asian attitudes, caused the women to form a small play group for support. May went on to help create the Little Friends Childcare Center in Los Angeles's Chinatown.ⁱⁱ The center also assisted Chinese American and immigrant mothers with important community resources. Experience in organizing working mothers with childcare challenges led to Chen's involvement in the labor movement. She demonstrated at the 1982 New York Chinatown strike. The protest was one of the most significant Asian American worker's strikes in history. Many strikers were women of Asian descent. The demonstration saw 20,000 garment factory workers marching the streets demanding work contracts.ⁱⁱⁱ The strike was successful on many fronts. Employees won better working conditions, and the company hired bilingual staff to interpret for employees. In addition, the company also provided workers with English-language classes and transportation services. In 1983 May's work on the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union Immigration Project was the first union-initiated legal advocacy department for immigrant workers. The project assisted members in applying for US citizenship, legalization, and sponsorship petitions for relatives overseas.^{iv}

Achievements

May Chen served as an international vice president of UNITE HERE.^v Chen is a founding member of the Asian-Pacific American Labor Alliance.

Essential Questions

1. How did May Chen support Asian American and immigrant women in her community?
2. After she left teaching, May began labor organizing and even joined a union.
 - a. How is this an act of resistance?
3. How did employees and their families benefit from the New York Chinatown strike?
4. ***“What matters most to me then and now is to make a better world for family, friends, immigrants, and workers.”***
 - a. What does the author mean in this quote?
 - b. Why is it important to continuously work for a better world for others?

ⁱ <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/riseup/feature/may-chen>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-7/asian-national.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://wocinsolidarity.tumblr.com/post/166217020648/may-chen-in-1982-may-chen-led-the-new-york>

^{iv} <https://apa.nyu.edu/may-chen-papers-wag-301/>

^v <https://medium.com/@AFTunion/25-labor-events-and-organizers-who-we-should-teach-about-during-women-s-history-month-8153fd50e71a>