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Working Overtime to Vanquish Sweatshops

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Body

WHAT brought them together, Trinh Duong said as she cuddled her baby son, Jeremy, was the feeling that people need to take control of their lives. She sat in a cluttered office in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, with three of her comrades from the National Mobilization Against **Sweatshops**, where they were trying to do nothing less than create a new labor movement for the next century.

With one exception, the six founders of the group are Asian-American immigrants or the children of Asian immigrants. Some grew up watching their parents **work** in **sweatshops**. All are under 30, and they are idealistic and energized in a 60's kind of way, a refreshing antidote to the money-mad, I.P.O.-frenzied youngsters on Wall Street.

Their personal histories and political affinities have led them to believe that too many people are stuck in dehumanizing jobs that don't pay a living wage. Their campaign calls for a 40-hour week and decent pay for everyone, and their goal is to link workers of all classes and colors under that idea. They've traveled around the country since founding the group in 1996 and have members and supporters in other cities. Recently, the group won a \$50,000 prize from the Fund for the City of New York, one of 32 awards given to New Yorkers who show exceptional commitment to addressing social conditions.

Fresh from claiming the award, four of the founders gathered in their office at the Brooklyn Workers Center. It is an independent center for Chinese workers, a shabby, exuberant space of papers and political posters. Everyone talked at once, about demonstrations, feminist ideology, who they were.

"We came to this country for freedom," said Ms. Duong, whose family came here from Vietnam and settled in Augusta, Me. "My mother sold fur coats when we moved to Reading, Pa., and when I was 4 years old she came home and said, 'My life is over,' because the job was so terrible. For a lot of women who **work**, they're forced to give up their dreams. You have to **work** like an animal to support your family."

Virginia Yu, 27 and Betty Yu, 22, are sisters who grew up in Sunset Park. They said they saw firsthand what **working** in **sweatshops** did to their parents, who went for days without seeing their children because of long **work** hours, and suffered nerve damage from overuse of their hands in sewing and making buttonholes.

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John Antush, 29, who is white and grew up in Edgemont in Westchester County in an upper-middle-class neighborhood, said he joined the group because he sought an alternative to the emptiness of the corporate values many of his peers embraced. The other two founders, Marie Koo and Nelson Mar, are the children of Chinese immigrants.

The young people said they been especially inspired by female **sweatshop** workers. Women are most often the primary caretakers of children, and are often stuck in the lowest-paying jobs. Many women, they said, **work** 12-hour days in factories for just above minimum wage, without receiving the **overtime** pay to which they are legally entitled. They often don't have enough time to go to the bathroom or make telephone calls.

"My mother was **working** 15 hours days," Betty Yu said. "I didn't know my mother. I didn't know my father. They were at **work** when I woke up and when I went to bed at night. My mother sewed and my father was a button operator."

"Most of the the time I spent with my parents was in the factory," she said. "It never occurred to me it was horrible. It was a way of life. You buy into the idea that this is the price my parents paid for being immigrants in this country."

Virginia Yu, who is a social worker, said she found her way to the labor movement in part because she realized that no matter how hard she **worked**, she would never make enough money to allow her parents to quit **working** in the factories. Her mother, she said, has repetitive strain injury and nerve damage in her upper back and neck.

The six founders of the group met in 1995 when they protested conditions at Jing Fong, a restaurant in Chinatown that paid workers as little as 75 cents an hour. Ms. Duong, Ms. Koo and Virginia Yu staged a hunger strike in front of the restaurant. The owners eventually settled out of court for \$1.1 million in back wages and damages.

Since then, group members have embarked on similar campaigns. They helped organize Chinese construction workers at the site of a New York University dormitory. They fought against long hours and other conditions at the Silver Palace Restaurant in Chinatown. They began a campaign called "Ain't I a Woman?" after Latina and Chinese women **working** in **sweatshops** making designer clothing began protesting abusive conditions.

The founders of the anti-**sweatshop** group are all college educated. They could have chosen easier, more lucrative ways of life. But this, they said, is what their hearts demand.

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Drawing (Mark Matcho)

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