When was the last time you went out to eat, a few hours ago, yesterday, last week? Today more and more people are eating out, not just for enjoyment but also for convenience. Because of this and the increasing ease and speed of travel, industrial food services is one of the fastest growing industries. It is also an industry that demands large numbers of unskilled laborers. In 1970, of approximately 1,000,000 waiters and waitresses, a vast majority were women. The nature of their work varies with the size and kind of food establishment, but basically the job is one of being servants to customers who are mainly male. This article will describe the oppression of waitresses by employers and customers in a high-priced Japanese restaurant where I worked.

First, let me explain a few particularities about this restaurant. It is located in Beverly Hills and is considered one of the leading Japanese restaurants in the city. It prides itself on having won several awards. Most of the clientele is rich businessmen, movie stars, lawyers, and doctors who come to the restaurant for more than just a meal. Almost all of the workers are from Japan, and there were only two American-born waitresses when I worked there. Also, it is one of the few Japanese restaurants in the city that is unionized.

In the last few years there has been a sharp increase in the popularity of Japanese restaurants in Southern California. This is due in part to the overall popularity of Eastern culture in the U.S., the media image of Asia and its "charming and hospitable culture", the interest that white America has in "ethnic culture", the so-called friendship between East and West, and increasing Japanese capital in the U.S. With this rise in popularity, many Japanese and Japanese American businessmen are exploiting their culture by using it as a way to make a profit.

These restaurants symbolize places away from the hustle and bustle of the outside world. They offer comfort and escape to the customer where he is waited upon by "beautiful and charming" women who have been trained in the arts of waiting on others. The attire is a kimono and zoriis, lovely to look at but highly uncomfortable and impractical. The kimono is a very confining garment, and zoris do not offer any support. This is especially important when you stop to consider that most waitresses are standing for their entire shift, which is anywhere from 6 to 8 hours. A waitress also has to be very careful of any movement she makes and never be caught in any "unladylike" positions. Thus, the waitress must take very small, careful steps (even if she's carrying a tray that weighs ten pounds and her customers want their food right away). She must make sure that her legs are covered at all times and
that when she sits she does so in a gracious manner.

Great emphasis is placed on a waitress' appearance. To insure this, daily inspections are made to check clean fingernails, clean hair, clean kimonos, and adequate make-up. Because the management is overly concerned with appearances, the women are encouraged to wear more make-up, don false eyelashes, wear wigs—in other words, become clean and inviting sexual objects.

Much of a particular restaurant's success depends on the atmosphere it sets. Waitresses are considered to be an integral part of upholding this atmosphere because of their close contact with the clientele. Therefore, waitresses in this situation are not only subjected to the regular pressures of being a waitress, but they are also expected to act out the stereotyped image of a Geisha girl.

Customers who come to these fancy Japanese restaurants are generally middle and upper-middle class people; most of them are usually white. They always ask questions like, "What part of Japan are you from?"; "What does the obi signify?"; "Where did you learn to speak such beautiful English?" But, as soon as you begin to answer their questions, very often the customers start recounting their experiences in Japan, tell you that you are sweet and charming, and act as though they were experts on your culture. While these questions are being asked and answered, the waitress is also supposed to remember everything that is ordered. I found that male customers often make very sexist and racist remarks, but since they are said with a smile and considered "complimentary," a waitress is supposed to respond with a smile or a blush. But, just forget something or make a human error, and you are no longer the sweet and charming Geisha, but an incompetent and irresponsible waitress.

The customers expect to be treated as though they were guest in your home, especially since part of the appeal of a Japanese restaurant lies in its emphasis on courtesy and hospitality. That is why, despite what a customer says or does to you, a waitress must keep smiling and never answer back. Remarks like, "Do you want to come home and cook for us?", are supposed to be met with humility. Never mind the racism or the degradation, you are a representative of the restaurant, and it is a part of the job to maintain a calm and relaxed atmosphere.

Working in a restaurant is like doing two jobs at the same time: one in the kitchen and bar and the other in the dining room. In the kitchen a waitress must be pushy and aggressive to be heard and get all of her orders in. She has to keep her eyes and ears open all the time. While her orders are being cooked, she also has to prepare many small dishes of tsukemono, daikon, and perhaps a raw egg. 

*photos by ALAN KONGO*
“hassle” during a rush hour, but considered vital part of Japanese dining. Besides all the pressure and confusion, a waitress also has to contend with the cook and bartender who are almost always men. They too are underpaid, but instead of seeing who is causing their problems, they take out their frustrations on the waitress. They are also behind-the-scenes, so it is easy for them to be insensitive to a waitress. I often saw them release their tension, particularly on waitresses who are slow, older and losing their youth, not well liked, or women who were not willing to play games to build up their ego. A cook or bartender who does not like you can ruin your career as a waitress. This makes a waitress especially vulnerable, and the first lesson one learns is how to cope with these men in the hierarchy. If no rapport is established (that is, if you do not recognize their superiority), then a waitress will have a very hard time. Despite all the pressure of the kitchen, a waitress is expected to be calm and serve the food in a pleasing manner once she returns to the dining room.

Another unique aspect of working in a Japanese restaurant is cooking sukiyaki right at the table. During my training period, much time was spent in learning how to do this without letting my kimono sleeve slip into the pan, spilling any bean sprouts on the table, or letting the tofu burn. This is one time when the customers’ eyes are on you, and one must be extra careful not to make any mistakes.

The management is usually aware of some of the problems of waitressing, but because their primary concern is profits, they often use these job pressures as ways to further competition; for example, in the area of appearance, they generally do not want women who are older or who are unattractive. Knowing this and fearing the loss of their jobs, the women become very competitive, put each other down, and constantly try to outdo each other. All the while, the boss profits from their division.

In these restaurants, most of the workers speak very little English and are usually immigrants who makes it doubly hard finding other employment. Realizing this, the management makes the employee feel obligated and forever grateful, reminding him or her that employment is difficult to obtain for immigrants and that conditions in the United States are better than those in Japan. Therefore the management feels justified in taking the attitude that everyone must blindly follow their rules. This also makes it easy to keep things running smoothly, superficially, because the management can very easily intimidate the women by using various forms of harassment such as threatening to take them off the schedule for a few days to “teach them a lesson”, delegate them to the poorer sections of the restaurant, singling them out as an example to the rest of the waitresses or having the cook foul up their orders. Faced with this oppressive situation, Japanese waitresses are forced to comply with the most backward labor codes, especially in the area of ownership of gratuities (tips), length of work shifts, and union recognition.

During the time that I worked at this restaurant, there was a struggle taking place regarding the ownership of tips. To a waitress, a tip is the most direct way of letting her know whether or not she has been successful in playing the right roles throughout the hierarchy. It allows the owner to pay far below minimum wages because supposedly “tips” make up the difference. In some restaurants, particularly the one I worked in, the tips were used as a way to supplement the wages of other employees, the captains (head waitresses or waiters), bus boys and hostesses. Despite the fact that a waitress does most of the work for the tip, in the restaurant where I worked, it was common practice to seize them, take off so much for the other workers, and then re-divide them. It was precisely around this issue that we began to organize.

Section 15 of the Uniform Contract between the Restaurant-Hotel Employer’s Council and the Los Angeles Joint Executive Board of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders’ Union states:

The gratuities shall be the property of the individual employee and shall not be deemed a part of the basic wage. No employee shall be required or permitted to contribute any part of his wages, tips or gratuities to the Captain, Headwaiter, Headwaitress...or anyone in charge. The Employer shall have no right to order the manner in which tips should be distributed among employees.

This particular section of our contract was being grossly violated everyday as we were forced to give 15% of our tips to the captains. We contacted the Union about this illegal practice, but it was hard to get them to enforce the contract because they knew that the management would resort to various means to single out the agitators and terminate them. The Union also wanted absolute proof and said that the only way to get action was if all the waitresses refused to comply with the management’s rules, or if one waitress was willing to risk losing her job by filing a written complaint.

This was very difficult to mobilize around for several reasons: (1) waitressing, as presently organized, is an individualized occupation. Cooperation is desired, but difficult to achieve; (2) often tips are very good, so good that a waitress would hardly miss 15%; (3) most of the women were fearful of losing their job and did not want to jeopardize themselves by taking a stand; and (4) since the restaurant business fluctuates greatly, it is easier to organize during a slump. Nevertheless, we did make some progress and we were able to raise some issues. There were more
than a few women involved in this struggle, and they began to see it not only as an economic problem, but also as a question of how much control they had over their jobs. In fact, one of the women's husbands drafted an idea on the solution to the problem based on the principle of self-determination. The proposal first stated that the tips from customers belonged to the waitresses; no one can interfere with the ownership. Secondly, it should be the waitresses who decide how they were to distribute tips (whether they should be pooled, whether they would pay the bus boys, the amount, etc.). This proposal was supported by the women, but unfortunately we couldn't get enough cooperation from the union. In fact, I don't think that they were sensitized enough to the particular problems of Japanese restaurants.

Another resolution that was proposed was to elect a shop steward who would be the union representative at the restaurant. This way, the waitresses would have someone from their own ranks who could deal with grievances immediately. In Japanese restaurants this would be essential because there are no Asian business agents employed by the union, let alone anyone who could speak Japanese. The women did not readily agree to this proposal because they feared being singled out, due to the paranoid atmosphere. They preferred a more discreet way of dealing with the situation such as voting, a poll, or some other means. This particular struggle went on for over four months and was never fully resolved. In fact, the women often told me that they had tried before to change conditions but, after their defeat, things usually became worse. This was a constant obstacle that we faced. Nevertheless, we did learn many things from this struggle: that solidarity and trust are developed through struggle, that we each have a responsibility to each other and that the boss is not an emperor who can control our lives. We also learned more about the union we belonged to and found that even though it was not as strong as other unions, it at least offered some legal avenues for our grievances.

Waitresses have never been a militant or organized group of workers. There are many reasons for this, the most obvious being the individualized nature of the work and the constant turnover. Besides this, the tipping system discourages militancy because it gives a waitress the illusion that she can, on her own initiative, gain financial security by pleasing her customers and the boss. Despite all of these things, waitresses have gone on strike and won the right to union recognition and basic benefits. One of the most famous strikes of waitresses took place in Chicago in 1914. It lasted for approximately five months and is noted not only for the militancy of the women, but also for the horrifying brutality of the police and repressive maneuvers of the legal system. The grievances expressed then are not unfamiliar to waitresses today as they revolve around conditions that continue to exist. The women were protesting the fact that they were forced to make payments to busy boys, that a dollar a day was deducted from their pay for laundry and that they were forced to pay for food which customers refused and sent back to the kitchen. This strike not only won massive support, but it also helped to pave the way for a stronger waitresses' union.

Waitresses belong to the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders' International Union (AFL-CIO). This Union is broken down into the various crafts. Today there are no longer separate unions for waitresses or waiters. They have merged together to become a stronger collective voice in trade union activities. This merger is seen as a way to further protect the benefits and rights won by restaurant workers. It is also a way for women to obtain equal rights and pay with male workers. This action was long overdue, occurring only after State and National legislative bodies deemed it mandatory.

The new union is the Union 8 in Los Angeles. Since the merger was effective January 1, 1974, it is still hard to measure what effects it will have, but the leadership of the Union in Los Angeles has expressed confidence in its merging of efforts.

Despite some advancements and victories, the Union is still only a partial solution at this point. But for many restaurant workers, union recognition should be seen as the first step towards workers gaining control over their jobs. One recent significant event, particularly for Japanese restaurants, is the victory at the Nippon Club in New York City. It is the first Japanese restaurant to be organized in the history of that city and has spurred other locals into an extensive organizing campaign at other Japanese restaurants. Last year, in spite of an overwhelming National Labor Relations Board election victory by the 40 employees of the Club, the owner refused to bargain. New York Locals 1, 15, and 89 called a strike against the Club on November 2, 1973. It ended on January 10, 1974, when a three-year labor contract was signed by the Club and the three unions. This event demonstrates that it is possible to defeat the bosses by organizing and acting collectively.

The demands for more benefits and higher wages should also be coupled with challenges to the sexism and racism that waitresses face daily. Waitresses must consciously combat male supremacy and begin to see that they share a common sisterhood that could destroy the competition and rivalry that now exists. When waitresses and other restaurant workers (especially bus boys, dishwashers, bartenders and cooks) recognize that they share common problems as workers, they will be able to unite as a class to fight effectively the owners who exploit their labor, thereby fundamentally challenging a system that permits low wages, poor working conditions and racism.