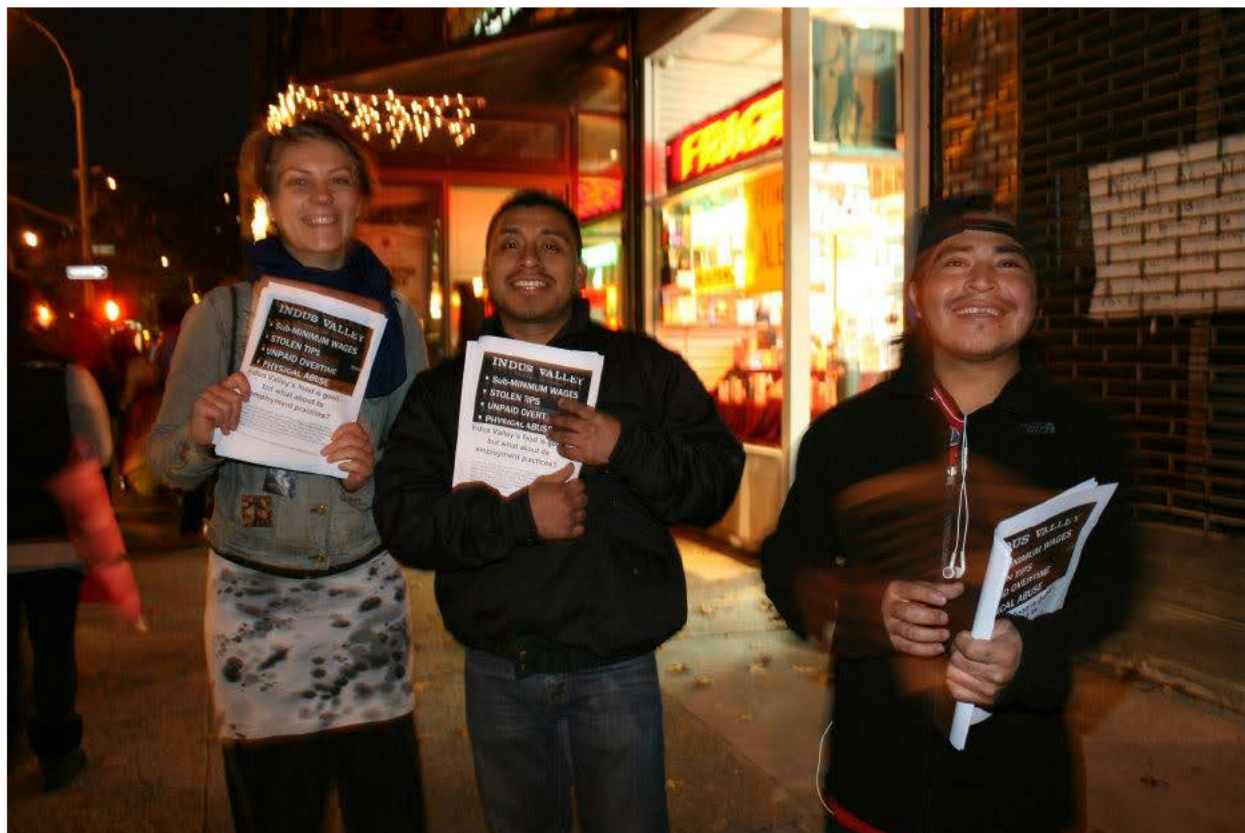


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## **Indus Valley Restaurant Workers Protest**

*Student groups neglect to address local labor issue*

Written by George Joseph



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Political clubs across campus decry human rights violations just about as often as Columbia tries to destroy Harlem. Republicans, Democrats, and everyone in between rail on Iran, China, and Russia for their dehumanizing working conditions because they are easy targets. It's easy to have speakers, discussions, and co-sponsorships on international labor issues no one can do anything about. A lot of chatter and yelling gets your attention, but changes nothing in the big picture. Sweatshop labor is a reality here in Morningside Heights. It's an issue all groups even vaguely interested in social justice must confront.

According to Jane Chung of Gladstein, Reif & Meginniss, LLP, the New York State Department of Labor has been investigating the *Indus Valley* restaurant at 100<sup>th</sup> and Broadway and its management since 2008 for minimum wage and overtime pay violations. The current lawsuit places them under further legal scrutiny for refusing to properly remunerate twelve former workers since 2006. Chung told me, "The

cumulative amount that Indus Valley unlawfully refused to pay at the time is almost \$400,000 in wages and tips and, under the law, the workers are entitled to more than double that amount including interest and penalties.” The owners seem determined to neglect their financial responsibility; in fact, Chung noted that Indus Valley and its management have refused to pay their own lawyer over \$100,000 in legal fees and, for that reason, their own lawyer has asked permission from the judge to no longer represent them. Phuman Singh, one of the two owner-defendants, is no stranger to minimum wage laws; according to court documents, he and one of his former establishments were sued in a similar case in 2007. These owners are accused of consistently violating the law, paying their dishwashers and deliverymen about [\\$2.50 and \\$4.80](#) respectively and seizing portions of their hard-earned tips. To add further insult to injury, many of the workers have complained about both verbal and [physical abuse](#), which shows you just the extent of their ruthlessness.

Last Saturday I spent my evening with two former workers of the Indus Valley Restaurant, Octavio and Alejandrino. They stood quietly, wearing worn black clothes that hinted at the months of frustration they had suffered. Though Octavio had a 3am construction shift to go to the next morning, the two decided to come out to support the protest we had organized against their former employers at the Indus Valley restaurant. Though there was a language barrier, I tried to put myself in their shoes:

*(The following is a dialogue translated from Spanish to English.)*

*GJ: How did the managers treat you?*

*Octavio: They did treat us badly because they didn't pay us a just amount for working many hours. We felt bad because later we found out, they were paying very little. So we're fighting for what they owe us.*

*GJ: Were you or any of your coworkers ever abused?*

*Octavio: Well, it was a lot of work and they paid us very little. As a matter of fact, the owner would tell us... he would curse us out. He would call us, "Motherf\*\*rs". He hit one of my coworkers, a dishwasher. Because, I don't know, they got into a heated argument, so the guy hit 'em.*

*GJ: Why did you stop working there?*

*Octavio: Actually, the owner fired me. For the same reason, we had already found out we were getting paid too little. And we wanted to ask him for a raise.*

*GJ: Is there anything you would like to say to the owners?*

*Octavio: The question is a little complicated. It's very unjust that he paid us those wages. And besides, he would seize our tips. If the customers would give us five dollars he would steal three, and give us two.*

*GJ: Is there anything you would like to say to the students?*

*Octavio: Many thanks to you all for helping us. We thank you a lot for your support to make justice with this lawsuit that we are in. So that the workers who come after us will have a better wage and an equal future.*

The dialogue was certainly a traumatic recollection, but the workers managed to maintain good spirits while out in front of their former restaurant in part because the mood was loud and almost festive. A chorus of “Shame on you, shame on you” pierced through the thin glass windows at the Indus Valley. Almost forty Columbia and Barnard students, organized by *Student Worker Solidarity* (formerly *Students Support Barnard Workers*) stood with the abused workers to demand owners pay back what they owe. In the dusky Manhattan evening, the red traffic light hues, flashing police cars, and handmade signs all swirled together into a vibrant scene. Students formed protest lines in front of *Indus Valley*, handing out flyers and discouraging people from patronizing such an abusive establishment. As Octavio, the former employee, exclaimed, “While we were out here, only four people came in!”

This sort of abuse happens every day in New York City. It's not an issue of left vs. right, it's just human rights. A few groups across campus have already shown interest in the issue, particularly Amnesty International and the CU Democrats, but a much wider coalition is needed to effect real change. Everyone from the College Republicans to the ISO should be jumping on this issue because a belief in the basic dignity of human beings is one that unites our community. I'm tired of eating club themed cupcakes, attending cosponsored lectures, flyering for discussions, and rambling about interesting ideas in class. If we never put our high minded philosophy into issues as clear cut as this, it's all useless.

Cassandra Muñoz, a first time protester and member of Columbia's Chicano Caucus, recalled, "I was surprised that they didn't realize how little they we're being paid. Octavio told me, '*asi son todos los restaurantes*' (that's how all restaurants are). They actually expect to be mistreated." What Octavio said is true, but only because we have done nothing to help him.

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