However, Asian merchants are the 'frontline' representatives of large corporate business in minority communities and therefore face the anger of a poor population. When minority communities respond, it is sometimes with political organizing. For example, the Black community in Harlem called a boycott of Asian stores in part because Black community members accused the merchants of taking dollars out their community. However, the firebombings and beatings of Asian merchants in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. are examples of another, more common expression of anger and frustration.

Is Reconciliation Possible?

Sam Cacas has worked closely with several efforts to address the problems of Black/Asian tension. As director of the Community Violence Prevention Project, Cacas participated in a successful campaign to make emergency assistance more accessible to recent immigrants and refugees. In response to this community pressure the Alameda County Board of Supervisors approved a translation service for the 911 emergency assistance number in late 1986. The service includes more than 80 languages, which Cacas hopes will particularly help recently-arrived Asians who are the victims of intimidation or attack.

To resolve conflicts between the Asian and Black communities, Cacas advocates legislation requiring the police to keep statistics on racially-motivated crimes so that evidence of such attacks is easier to accumlate. He also argues for effective human relations commisions to mediate community conflicts and for increasing 'sensitivity training' for service providers who handle racial conflict.

Educational projects in schools stressing ethnic studies and interracial relationships are also necessary, says Cacas. Often aggressors are ignorant about who their victims are, what their problems are, and how they share common interests.

Asian merchants and Blacks are peacefully coexisting in one Black neighborhood in Philadelphia. There, Korean business-owners are participating in efforts to improve the community. Says Jewel Williams, president of the Susquehanna Neighborhood Advisory Council: "Ever since 1980, we have been trying to assist people who are needy, and the Koreans have been helping. Susquehanna Avenue has been a blighted area since the 1960's, since the riots in 1964. We've asked business people to come in here and make Susquhanna Avenue live again. The Koreans are the only ones who came. They've come in and done a good job. If they weren't here, it would be blighted again."

An innovative program at Fremont High School in East Oakland, California, has successfully begun to address the specific problem of tension between Blacks and Southeast Asian refugees. The project, jointly conceived by Asian Community Mental Health Service (ACMHS) and Conciliation Forums of Oakland (CFO), trains students to mediate the conflicts of other students. The mediators, who take a 26-hour preparation course, learn what CFO project coordinator Millie Cleveland calls "active listening." They validate and empathize with both sides of the conflict and they summarize what was said back to the hostile parties.

For every complaint or report of a conflict, a panel of trained student mediators is established. Each panel is chosen to insure that both people in conflict feel confident that their point of view will be fairly heard. For many students, says Cleveland, this is the first time they have been able to tell their side to a sympathetic ear. They express anger and other feelings about the conflict, and in the course of talking the disputants begin to communicate with each other.

According to Cleveland, this process enables both sides to see each other as individuals, to see the other person's point of view, and to psychologically prepare themselves for compromise. Cleveland explains how the hostile parties begin to express regret for the conflict and talk about "how they would act next time" in a similar situation. The parties then sign a contract, drawn from the comments of the disputants, which formalizes their agreement to use communication and compromise to resolve conflicts. Often, says Cleveland, it becomes clear that the conflict is between two individuals rather than between representatives of different ethnicities or nationalities.

Since the implementation of the Fremont High project, there have been no reoccurances of conflict between students who took their problem to a panel, says Cleveland. "All the disputants agreed that it was worth coming, and that in absence of the panel something worse would have happened," she says. ■

— Michael Laslett

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