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AMERICA

Deputy secretary of labor pick got her start fighting for enslaved Thai garment workers

Decades before going into government, Julie Su took on one of the most horrific cases of labor exploitation and human rights violations.



— Julie Su, at her home in Cerritos, Calif., in 2013.

Katie Falkenberg / Los Angeles Times via Getty Image file

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By Kimmy Yam

Julie Su, who was nominated Wednesday to

be deputy labor secretary by President Joe Biden, has been an important figure among labor organizers for years. Her rise to prominence was fueled by her work on one of the most high-profile labor cases in California's history.

The 51 year old, who has been the state's labor secretary since 2019, made a name for herself in the mid-1990s as a young lawyer, fighting for more than 70 Thai garment workers who had been enslaved in a sweatshop in El Monte, near Los Angeles. Su's efforts, in part, helped transform the labor climate for many low-income workers in the garment industry.

Connie Chung Joe, CEO of the nonprofit Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Los Angeles, for which Su later worked for years, said Su has a legacy of being "committed to those with less of a voice."

"Julie's work has been intentional to serve marginalized people who fall through the cracks of our society. Her work in California set policies to serve those most in need,"

Connie Chung Joe, CEO of the nonprofit Asian Americans Advancing Justice—Los Angeles, said.

“Working with the Thai garment workers revealed just how vulnerable and invisible Asian immigrants can be,” Connie Chung Joe said. “Julie’s work has been intentional to serve marginalized people who fall through the cracks of our society. Her work in California set policies to serve those most in need.”

Su’s nomination is among a group of sub-Cabinet picks by Biden who have been younger and more left-leaning than his more high-profile Cabinet-level nominees. (Boston Mayor Marty Walsh was chosen for labor secretary.) In reference to Su’s nomination, along with Rohit Chopra to lead the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, said that the group has been “really pleased” with the picks.

“There are just some great, great hires across the board that we’re very excited about,” Jayapal said on a call with reporters.

Su, who now awaits confirmation by the Senate, has been dealing with criticism

recently for how California's labor department handled jobless claims. Scam rings stole more than \$31 billion in California unemployment funds, largely through claims that were made via the federally supported Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, Su confirmed to reporters last month.

“There is no sugar coating the reality,” she said. “California did not have sufficient security measures in place to prevent this level of fraud.”

Decades before she held any government positions, Su began her legal career with the El Monte sweatshop case, which became known as one of the most horrific incidents of labor exploitation and human rights violations. Su, who was 26 and barely two years out of law school at the time, helped lead a team that sued the captors as well as the retailers and manufacturers who owned the labels and sold the clothes. The Thai immigrants, who had come to the U.S. undocumented, were held behind barbed wire, in a seven-unit apartment complex that functioned as a factory and were forced to toil long hours for little pay to “earn” their freedom. Some of the workers had been kept there for as long as seven years before the group was discovered in a raid.

Su, then a staff attorney at the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, along with activists

and the workers themselves, pushed to ensure that those at the top of the production pyramid were responsible for working conditions throughout the rest of the chain. Companies had previously argued that subcontractors were liable for violations of workers' rights. The efforts lead to the passage of California legislation that placed an onus on manufacturers and retailers for garment workers' wages when contractors failed to pay, holding companies responsible for meeting the minimum wage requirements for all workers in chains of production.

“The garment worker cases and campaigns demonstrated that Asian immigrant workers could and would fight back, defend their rights, and champion systemic change, given the chance, the encouragement and the support,” Karin Wang, former vice president of programs and communications at

Advancing Justice-LA, said.

The bill was regarded as among the “toughest anti-sweatshop laws at the time and secured precedent-setting legal victories,” Karin Wang, former vice president of programs and communications at Advancing Justice-LA, said. It also was a watershed moment in Asian American advocacy during a time when issues regarding the community were often ignored or erased.

“The garment worker cases and campaigns demonstrated that Asian immigrant workers could and would fight back, defend their rights, and champion systemic change, given the chance, the encouragement and the support,” she said. “Those achievements reverberate today, with the El Monte case continuing to be a case study in many law school classes and for many organizers and advocates.”

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Ron Herrera, president of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, emphasized that while Su's work led to significant developments in labor laws, she also helped the workers with other critical aspects of their lives.

“As a young lawyer, obviously that showed her compassion for workers’ struggles,” Herrera said. “One of the things that sometimes people miss because it kind of steers away from labor law is that she helped those folks with immigration status, she helped those workers not get deported.”

With help from Su, the workers were able to obtain visas and, later on, permanent residence status. Su, who was described at the time as “the Freedom Fighter” and “Los Angeles’ most celebrated, young, non-O.J. lawyer,” spent a significant amount of time with the workers in other settings as well, taking them to medical appointments,

lunch or joining them at the local Buddhist temple.

“Being an immigrant, sometimes people look down on you. And she's lived that and I think it's very vital. I think that's where you see the compassion she has for workers. It feeds from her upbringing and the fact that she's a child of immigrants,” Ron Herrera, president of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, said.

“Can you imagine not seeing the sky for years? On our very first outing, one of the workers said to me, ‘This is my new birthday. I feel I have been born again,’” Su told The Los Angeles Times at the time.

The case remains career-defining for Su. Advocates say that her background as the daughter of working-class Chinese immigrants likely helped her better

understand and empathize with the plight of workers. Her parents owned a laundromat when she was young and she often found herself translating for them. She told the Los Angeles Times that she's been ridiculed because of her race and witnessed discrimination directed at her parents due to their lack of English skills.

“She wasn't raised with a silver spoon in her mouth,” Herrera said. “Being an immigrant, sometimes people look down on you. And she's lived that and I think it's very vital. I think that's where you see the compassion she has for workers. It feeds from her upbringing and the fact that she's a child of immigrants.”

Given her past experience and background, activists and Asian American lawmakers alike pushed for Su to be given a Labor Department position. Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., wrote a letter, signed by over a dozen legislators, advocating for Su to have the prominent position in Biden's Cabinet.

Kimmy Yam

Kimmy Yam is a reporter for NBC Asian America.

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