Worker Centers

By Janice Fine

Worker centers vary in terms of their organizational models, how they think about their mission, and how they carry out their work. However, most share some core characteristics. Centers have a social movement orientation and organize around both economic issues and immigrant rights. They pursue these goals by seeking to impact the labor market through direct economic action, on the one hand, and public policy reform activity, on the other. They are enmeshed in the struggle for federal immigration reform and related issues like access to drivers' licenses as well as housing, education, healthcare, and criminal justice issues. Many favor alliances with religious institutions and government agencies and seek to work closely with other activist groups in a variety of formal and informal coalitions.

The organizing and advocacy work that immigrant worker centers do is in three general areas:

- Defending workers' rights and trying to improve working conditions in low-wage industries;
- Responding to attacks on immigrants in their communities and fighting for immigration reform;
- Dealing with issues of immigrant political incorporation, including education, housing, and healthcare.

Centers apply a variety of strategic approaches to their organizing and advocacy work. These include bringing direct economic pressure to bear on employers and industries (pickets, direct actions and boycotts, and much less frequently, job actions) and building political and community support for public policy reforms that require employers and industries to change their behavior.

The vast majority of worker center members are recent immigrants (including large numbers of undocumented workers) who labor in the worst jobs. Worker centers have had unprecedented success in developing leadership among these workers. They now provide a central vehicle through which low-wage immigrant workers are receiving services and education around workplace issues, participating in civil society, telling their stories to the larger community, and organizing to seek economic and political change.

Most of the workers who contact immigrant worker centers are employed in low-wage industries. Immigrant worker centers have developed campaigns and devised some very creative and effective strategies to win lasting improvements for low-wage workers. The greatest accomplishment of these campaigns to date has been compelling individual employers to pay back wages to workers. Other campaigns have sought to hold large corporations responsible for the actions of their sub-contractors. Organizations have also won substantial economic improvements for low-wage workers by moving local and state government to require employers to raise wages and improve conditions of work via administrative action and public policy change.

While they often target particular employers as well as industries within local labor markets, worker centers are not work-site based. Unlike the traditional American union, most do not focus on organizing for majority representation in individual work sites or on negotiating collective bargaining agreements for individual groups of workers. Worker centers are hybrids that combine elements of different types of

organizations—from political parties, settlement houses, immigrant civic organizations, community organizations and social movement groups to unions, feminist consciousness-raising organizations, and producer coops. In many centers, ethnicity and language, rather than occupation or industry, are the primary identities through which workers come to know and participate in the organizations. Ethnic identity and the experience of prejudice are central analytical lenses through which experiences in and the organization of the labor market as a whole, are understood by center organizers. Often workers come into a center because they live or work in its geographic area of focus, not because they work in a specific industry or occupation.

Because they are committed to going beyond advocacy to providing a means through which workers can take action on their own behalf, most centers place enormous emphasis on leadership development and democratic decision-making, putting processes in place to involve workers on an ongoing basis, and working to develop the skills of worker leaders, so that they are able to participate meaningfully in guiding the organization. Many identify strongly with the philosophy and teaching methods of Paulo Freire and other popular educators and draw upon literacy circles and other models that originated in Central and South American liberation movements.

Although they may relate to a much larger number of workers, most centers have fewer than a thousand members and they view membership as a privilege that is not automatic but must be earned. They require workers to take courses and/or become involved in the organization in order to qualify.

Centers demonstrate a deep sense of solidarity with workers in other countries and an ongoing programmatic focus on the global impact of structural adjustment, trade, and labor policies. Some worker center founders and leaders had extensive experience with organizing in their countries of origin and actively draw upon those traditions in their current work. Some centers maintain ongoing ties with popular organizations in the countries from which workers have migrated, share strategies, publicize each other's work, and support each other as they are able.

The first worker centers were founded by Black worker activists in North and South Carolina, and by immigrant activists in New York City's Chinatown, along the Texas-Mexican border in El Paso, and in San Francisco. They arose during the late 1970s and early 1980s in response to changes in manufacturing that resulted in worsened conditions, factory closings, and the rise of lower-paying service sector jobs. Disparities of pay and treatment between African American and white workers, as well as exploitation within ethnic economic enclaves and in the broader economy (including the informal sector) were also major catalysts for the creation of the first wave of centers.

The second wave of centers emerged in the late 1980s and early- to mid-1990s. They appeared as large new groups of Latino immigrants, some in flight from the Central American wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, came to live and work in urban metropolitan areas, as well as the suburbs, and growing numbers of Southeast Asians emigrated to the United States seeking work. Drawing on the first-wave centers for their organizational models, these groups were founded by a diverse set of institutions and individuals, including churches and other faith-

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Photo: Mario Martinez and Pablo Alvarado, organizers for the Day Laborers' Union, a project of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, try to convince workers on the street to come into the Center.

based organizations, social service and legal aid agencies, immigrant NGOs, and unions. In fact, as a strategy for organizing in the non-union garment sector, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) opened four worker centers in Miami, New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

From 2000 to the present, a new wave of centers has emerged. Many of the workers involved are from new chain migration streams from communities in Mexico who are reacting to the push factors of uneven economic development and hemispheric free trade agreements, and to the pull of plentiful jobs in the United States. Most of the centers continue to arise in the nation's cities. However, more centers are being organized in suburban and rural areas and in southern states in response to the large concentrations

The Workplace Project

By Nadia Marin Molina

The Workplace Project was founded in 1992 to help end the exploitation of Latino immigrant workers on Long Island. Working with—and learning from—our members, as well as other worker centers, such as Chinese Staff and Workers' Association and Tenant and Workers' Support Committee, we've tried many different strategies in our struggle for social justice. In some cases, we learned our lessons from other organizations, while other times our insight was gained through hard experience. This article is about those lessons.

The Workplace Project has participated in various studies documenting workplace abuses. One study we developed and carried out in collaboration with Hofstra University demonstrated the prevalence of abuse against day laborers: Half of the study's respondents reported wage theft, while one-quarter reported being physically assaulted on the job or while looking for work. The abuse against domestic workers is at least as bad—our survey of over 20 domestic workers revealed an average wage of $4.03 per hour, far below minimum wage.

Given the systemic nature of this abuse, it is impossible to make any real change by fighting cases one by one. On the positive side, there are large numbers of community members who are personally affected and who want to take action. There are also larger numbers of potential allies among students, churches, businesses, and unions that support our work. Through our organizing, we have built committees of factory workers, building maintenance workers, day laborers, and domestic workers, and some of these have generated new, geographically-based committees.

After people join a committee and become associate members of the organization, they can then take a workers' rights course and become leader members. These members are the driving force for our campaigns and activities. They conduct outreach campaigns; hold educational workshops; engage in direct action against targets; provide legal support for individual cases and legislative work for broader campaigns; produce media for both the Latino, and general North American community; and essentially multiply our ability to accomplish what we could never accomplish with a small staff.

By combining strategic legal action and community organizing, The Workplace Project has won several noteworthy victories, including:

- Helping pass a 2006 domestic workers Bill of Rights legislation in Nassau County, New York, to better inform domestic workers about their basic rights by requiring placement agencies to provide that information;
- Stopping a racially discriminatory campaign in Farmingville, New York, which sought to evict 2000 immigrants from their homes in 2005-06;
- Recuperating over $170,000 in unpaid wages in 2006;

of immigrants working in the service, poultry, meatpacking, and agricultural sectors. Also, more centers are emerging among recent Filipino, African, and South Asian immigrants, and more of them than in past waves are directly connected to faith-based organizations and unions.

The number of worker centers in the United States has increased dramaticall, paralleling the increased flow of specific immigrant groups in large numbers. In 1992, there were fewer than five centers nationwide. As of 2007, there are at least 160 worker centers in over 80 cities, towns, and rural areas. ■

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- Convincing the local district attorney's office in 2006 to begin to arrest employers (largely construction contractors) for non-payment of wages;
- Achieving various other workplace victories, such as helping workers reduce their workload and oust their abusive supervisor at a luxury hotel.

Immigration Policy Reform

In 2007, the most crucial issue will be whether Congress will pass immigration policy reform that will legalize immigrants, reunite families, and protect workers' rights. However, no matter what happens, the work of building our movement must include the following:

■ **Creating self-sustaining organizations.** Funding for worker/community organizing is scarce, which means that as the number of worker centers grow, we must become more creative and self-reliant, and seek to develop our own alternative sources of funding. The Workplace Project is participating in an initiative to develop a "stored value card" that would serve as a long-term benefit for our members, as well as a way to save money that would otherwise be given in fees to large corporations, like Western Union. Using revenue generated from this card, membership dues, and an array of grassroots fundraising events, our intent is to become self sufficient.

■ **Convincing non-immigrants that they have much more in common with immigrants than they think.** In particular, we have to speak to those who see that life is getting more difficult, wages are being stretched, housing costs are rising, and healthcare is a luxury—and point out who really deserves the blame. Many of the same Congress-men who are responsible for the devastation of the economy in Mexico, for example, are also responsible for helping financial institutions take money out of the pockets of citizens through exorbitant credit card interest rates and ATM fees.

Planting Seeds for Victory

As the immigrants' rights protests grew in the spring of 2006, some observers were surprised by how immigrants were able to mobilize so spontaneously and in such great numbers. However, these mobilizations were no more spontaneous than plants sprouting during periods of rain and warm weather. The mobilizations were due in large part to seeds that we had been planting for many years—when we were educating workers about their rights to a minimum wage, and to organize and fight for justice. The future of our movement for justice will depend on diligently increasing the number of organizations and community leaders that continue to plant these seeds of struggle. When the rains come, we will be ready. ■

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Photo:
Workers play checkers while waiting for contractors at a day labor site administered by the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles.