

## WORKER CENTERS

### Organizing communities at the edge of the dream

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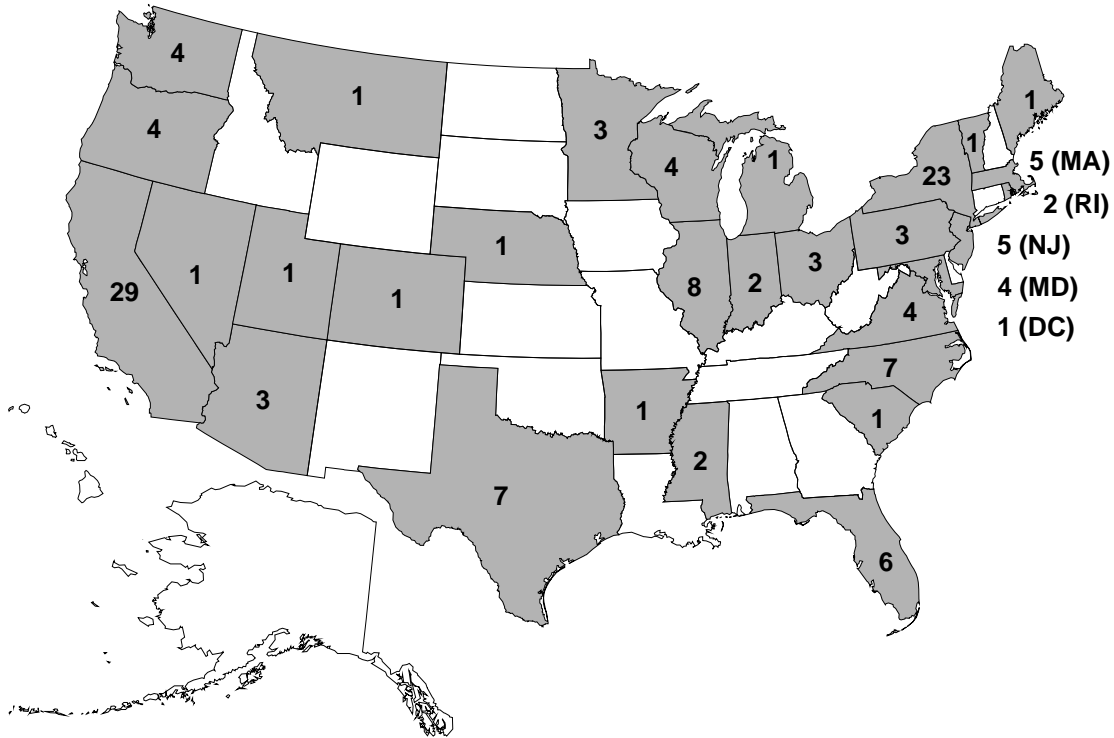
Millions of immigrants, African Americans, and other people of color labor on the lowest rungs of metropolitan labor markets with limited prospects for improving the quality of their present positions or advancing to better jobs. It is unfortunate but true that immigration status, combined with ethnic and racial origin, has perhaps the greatest impact on jobs, compensation, and a worker's options for redress when mistreated by an employer.

The exploitation of immigrant workers is certainly not new—earlier waves of immigrants also faced discrimination and took up some of society's dirtiest and most dangerous jobs. What has changed is the prospect for immigrant workers' labor market success and integration into American community life, politics, and society. Many of the institutions, civic groups, political parties, and especially labor organizations that once existed to help these workers have either disappeared or declined dramatically. Into this breach, new institutions have struggled to emerge over the past several decades.

One such emergent institution that shows considerable promise is worker centers, which have grown from five centers in 1992 to at least 139 in over 80 U.S. cities, towns, and rural areas across 32 states (**Figure A**). These centers have emerged as central components of the immigrant community infrastructure and are playing an indispensable role in helping immigrants navigate the world of work in the United States. They are gateway organizations that provide information and training in workers' rights, employment, labor and immigration law, legal services, the English language, and many other programs. They represent a new generation of mediating institutions that are integrating low-wage

**FIGURE A**

**Worker centers by state, 2005**



Source: See appendix for the names and locations of these 137 worker centers.

workers into American civic life and facilitating collective deliberation, education, and action. Worker centers provide low-wage workers a range of opportunities for expressing their “collective voice” as well as for taking collective action.

### **The National Worker Center Study**

The Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG), in partnership with the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), commissioned a study of worker centers. Most of the centers studied are working with a predominantly immigrant population and were identified by key informants as among the most advanced and promising models. The goals of the research were to identify various worker center models; evaluate their effectiveness in improving the lives of workers; and highlight their current strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and potential. The study is largely qualitative, although a survey of 40 organizations was conducted and the quantitative data from this sample is analyzed and presented along with nine case studies. The study will culminate with the publication by EPI and Cornell University Press of a book reporting the study’s findings. This EPI briefing paper summarizes the major findings from that book and presents an overview of the worker center phenomenon.

## Defining the worker center

For the purpose of this project, worker centers are defined as community-based and community-led organizations that engage in a combination of service, advocacy, and organizing to provide support to low-wage workers. The vast majority of them have grown up to serve predominantly or exclusively immigrant populations. However, there are a few centers that serve a primarily African American population or bring immigrants together with African Americans.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of this study is immigrant worker centers, but these organizations exist as a subset of a larger body of contemporary community-based and -led worker-organizing projects that have taken root across the United States in recent years. There are also other centers, especially among the day laborer population, that provide services and advocacy but are not presently engaging in organizing. The organizations that *do* engage in grassroots organizing, and those that do so among immigrant workers, are the specific focus of this study.

As a starting point, it is useful to think about the larger set of organizations engaging in grassroots organizing and then narrow the focus to immigrant worker centers in metropolitan areas. First, we identified and mapped a full range of community-based worker organizing projects, which we called worker centers. The majority of the organizations identified are immigrant worker centers, the focus of this study, but a wide range of groups was included on the map—African American-led organizations, groups that work with immigrants as well as non-immigrants, organizations that focus on workfare participants, groups that call themselves unions, and even groups that do identify themselves as worker centers. The purpose of the map was to capture the full breadth of new types of community-based worker organizing projects that are currently offering support to low-wage workers.

It is probable that, for every organization included on the map, there are twice as many others engaging in some similar activities that we were unable to identify. Ultimately, we were able to identify 139 organizations, 122 of which are working specifically with immigrants. We conducted 40 survey interviews, and among these interview subjects, 34 work with immigrants. In addition to the survey interviews, we carried out nine intensive case studies, focusing on organizations that work with immigrants (although two of them, the Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee and CAFÉ, work extensively with African Americans as well). Two of the organizations selected for case study, CAFÉ and Omaha Together One Community, do not refer to themselves as worker centers but were selected because their work comports with our definition.

Worker centers are community-based and community-led mediating institutions that provide support to low-wage workers. They employ a wide array of strategies to improve wages and working conditions. These include services (help with filing unpaid wage claims, accessing free health care, and learning English); advocacy (exposing problematic individual employers and industry-wide practices and calling for policy change); and organizing (pressing a set of demands on a specific employer, hiring agency, or industry-wide coordinating body). Worker centers are hybrids, combining elements of different types of organizations. Some features are suggestive of earlier U.S. social movements and civic institutions, including settlement houses, fraternal organizations, local civil rights organizations, and

unions. Other features, like cooperatives and popular education classes, are suggestive of the civic traditions of the home countries from which many of these immigrants came.

Like other immigrant service organizations, worker centers engage in service provision. It is the addition of organizing and advocacy that sets them apart. Centers build ongoing support systems and engage in leadership development among workers to take action on their own behalf for economic and political change. This organizing may take different forms depending upon the center, but all centers share a common commitment to providing a means through which workers can take action. Immigrant workers centers organize around both economic issues and immigrant rights. Centers pursue these goals by seeking to effect the labor market through direct economic action on the one hand and public policy reform activity on the other.

Worker centers vary in terms of their organizational models, how they think about their mission, and how they carry out their work. While there is wide variation among worker centers in terms of program and emphasis, most have the following features in common:

- Rather than being worksite-based, most centers focus their work geographically, working in a particular metropolitan area, city, or neighborhood. Unlike unions, their focus is not organizing for majority representation in individual worksites or for contracts for individual groups of workers.
- Sometimes ethnicity, rather than occupation or industry, is the primary identity through which workers come into relationship with centers. In other cases, ethnicity marches hand in hand with occupation. Discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity is a central analytic lens through which economic and social issues are viewed by the centers. In addition, a growing number of centers are working at the intersection between race, gender, and low-wage work.
- Centers place enormous emphasis on leadership development and democratic decision-making. They focus on putting processes in place to involve workers on an ongoing basis and strive to develop the skills of worker leaders so that they are able to participate meaningfully in guiding the organizations.
- They view education as integral to organizing. Workshops, courses, and training sessions are structured to emphasize the development of critical thinking skills that workers can apply to all aspects of their public lives, including work, education, neighborhood interaction, and health care.
- Centers demonstrate a deep sense of solidarity with workers in other countries and an ongoing programmatic focus on the global impact of labor and trade policies. Many centers maintain ongoing ties with popular organizations in the countries from which workers have migrated, share strategies, publicize each other's work, and support international partners as they are able.

- As work is the primary focus of life for many newly arrived immigrants, it is also the locus of many of the problems they experience. For this reason, the centers focus on work, but also have a broad orientation and respond to the variety of issues faced by recent immigrants to the United States.
- Centers favor alliances with religious institutions and government agencies and seek to work closely with other worker centers, nonprofit agencies, community organizations, and activist groups by participating in both formal and informal coalitions.
- Most centers 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. Most centers have small but very involved memberships.

## **Advocacy and organizing**

The advocacy and organizing that immigrant worker centers do above and beyond the services they provide are what sets them apart from other immigrant agencies and organizations. Centers understand the critical role of basic organizing: the need for creative direct action targeted at individuals and institutions at key points of leverage.

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

1. Raising wages and improving working conditions in low-wage industries;
2. Responding to attacks on immigrants in their communities and fighting for immigration reform; and
3. Dealing with issues of immigrant civic integration and political incorporation<sup>2</sup> including education, housing, health care, and discrimination.

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, actions and boycotts, and, much less frequently, strikes and slowdowns). Centers also work to build political and community support for the passage of reforms that require behavioral changes on the part of employers and industries. Another strategic priority of the worker centers involves ongoing advocacy work that puts immigrant issues and rights on the public policy agenda.

The primary targets of this advocacy and organizing are private actors such as individual employers, groups of employers, and local or state government entities. Worker centers defend immigrants' rights and pursue immigration reform at the local, state, and federal levels.

### ***Economic action organizing***

Immigrant worker centers deploy a broad range of approaches to compel employers to treat workers better and to push industries to improve conditions on the job. The greatest accomplishment of these

campaigns to date has been compelling individual employers to pay “back wages” to workers. Other campaigns that have sought to change the behavior of firms or industries (as opposed to forcing them to “pay up” one time) are distinguished by creative approaches, but have been harder to win. Organizations also have been able to win economic improvements for low-wage workers by moving local governments to act in ways that have required employers to raise wages and improve conditions of work. Finally, they have also been capable of forcing improvements in employers’ treatment of workers via catalyzing government administrative action and public policy change.

Worker center strategies that target a single employer have focused mainly on filing wage claims and coupling this legal action with a variety of forms of direct economic action at worksites to recover unpaid wages. These activities—calling employers and asking them to pay, filing wage claims, and picketing when they don’t—are the daily “bread and butter” work of the centers. But direct action to win other changes in the workplace or to alter conditions of employment has also been pursued.

One example of a worker center creatively targeting a corporation is the successful three-year campaign coupled with a lawsuit that the Garment Worker Center (GWC) waged on clothing retailer Forever 21, which resulted in paid back wages for scores of employees and an agreement by the company to work with GWC to improve working conditions at its sewing subcontractors.

Another worker center, the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), targeted Home Depot in a successful effort to improve hiring conditions for day laborers. The organization was able to bring pressure to bear on Home Depot to agree to situate a day laborer hiring hall in the parking lot of its Cypress Park store. Working with a supportive City Councilor, CHIRLA was able to use the leverage of the zoning process to compel Home Depot, in exchange for a building permit, to agree to set aside space and create an infrastructure for the opening of a city-financed day laborer center. The National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) has been engaged in conversations with top executives of Home Depot Corporation to discuss the possibility of working together on situating day laborer workers centers alongside its busy stores. NDLON has proposed that Home Depot promulgate a code of conduct for its stores to follow so that day laborers are treated fairly and not “criminalized” for seeking work. NDLON wants Home Depot to allow local day laborer centers to leaflet customers outside the stores about their services and to consider opening more day laborer workers centers on-site, like Cypress Park. NDLON now has a national Home Depot sub-committee that meets regularly via conference calls.

A final example is the successful conclusion in March 2005 of the four-year national boycott of Taco Bell, organized by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in Florida to improve the wages and working conditions of tomato pickers. In a precedent-setting victory, Yum Brands (the largest restaurant company in the world and owner of Taco Bell) agreed to pay a penny-per-pound “pass through” to its suppliers of tomatoes and to undertake joint efforts with CIW to improve working conditions in the Florida tomato fields. What is of special significance about both the Garment Worker Center’s success with Forever 21 and CIW’s victory over Yum Brands is that the organizations succeeded in getting corporations to take responsibility for the wages and working conditions of their sub-contractors.

An example of industry-wide organizing is the Korean Immigrant Worker Advocates’ (KIWA) successful campaign to substantially increase payment of the minimum wage in the Koreatown restau-

rant industry in Los Angeles. It did so through economic action, including picketing 10 restaurants and targeting three for sustained boycotts. For nine days, KIWA even organized a hunger strike on behalf of one worker who had been denied wages at one of the biggest restaurants in the neighborhood. When the campaign began, virtually 98% of the restaurants weren't paying minimum wage. Several years later, KIWA estimates that the compliance rate of Koreatown restaurants with the minimum wage has increased to over 50%.

Many immigrant worker centers conduct their direct economic-action organizing campaigns largely on their own or with the support of non-union allies. Others are trying to partner with existing unions to conduct sector-based organizing drives. Still others have experimented with founding independent unions, creating rudimentary hiring hall systems (where jobs from various employers are allotted to registered applicants, usually on the basis of rotation or seniority) and worker cooperatives.

Worker centers work with unions to organize low-wage workers in a variety of ways. Some centers, when they have been approached by a group of workers who would like to organize, have contacted a union that is interested and handed the workers off to them. Other centers in similar circumstances have tried to maintain some level of involvement over the course of an organizing campaign, although the campaign itself is run by the labor union. A smaller number of centers have participated in joint organizing campaigns with unions. The Chicago Interfaith Workers Rights Center, for example, teamed up with the United Electrical (UE) Workers Union to successfully win union recognition in a manufacturing plant in Wheeling, Illinois. In Nebraska, Omaha Together One Community (OTOC) joined with the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) to organize more than a thousand area meatpackers.

Other centers have pioneered the creation of independent unions. This is most often the case among workers for whom a union does not already exist, such as cabbies, or where existing unions are reluctant to organize, such as in restaurants. The New York Taxi Workers Alliance is one worker center that has taken the form of an independent union. KIWA's battle with the restaurant and grocery industries in Koreatown led it to try to organize an independent workers union specifically for low-wage workers in that area.

Organizing day laborers is another form of direct economic action through which worker centers in Long Island, Chicago, Seattle, Los Angeles, and smaller cities have achieved some success. These centers have successfully defended the constitutional right of day laborers to seek employment and negotiated arrangements with communities about where day laborers can gather daily to seek work. They also have been able to establish minimum wages at shape-up sites and hiring halls. Finally, by formalizing hiring halls so that a larger number of businesses feel comfortable utilizing them, day laborer organizers have generated additional jobs.

A dilemma when researching economic-action organizing is how best to measure and judge the effectiveness of this type of direct organizing. Direct action against specific employers, especially those businesses that can be hurt by public picketing, has been successful in helping workers recover back wages, but has not, for the most part, resulted in reinstatement to the job, wage increases, or other changes in firm-level practices. Some industry-based worker centers have been successful in raising

wages and a few have, against considerable odds, waged boycotts that resulted in corporations agreeing to alter their practices. However, as a whole, impact has been limited because of the small scale of most organizing efforts, and the lack of resources to create ongoing organization in particular workplaces or to engage in a sustained industry-wide campaign. Worker centers also find it difficult to effect sustained changes because for the most part they aren't negotiating with employers or signing contracts and the centers' focus must shift to other issues or campaigns.

## **Public policy organizing and advocacy**

In addition to organizing workers and advocating for employer change, worker centers play an important role in shaping public policy initiatives. The public policy work of worker centers takes four principal forms:

1. Partnering with or targeting government agencies to ensure enforcement of existing laws and regulations.
2. Working to strengthen compliance with existing laws and improve enforcement.
3. Organizing for the passage of new legislation to raise wages and/or improve working conditions of immigrant workers.
4. Fighting for immigration reform and immigrant rights.

In general, worker centers and other contemporary low-wage worker organizing projects have had their greatest impact on improving working conditions and raising wages through government action and local and state public policy initiatives. The Coalition of Immigrant Worker Advocates (CIWA) is a good example of what advocacy has been able to accomplish in the area of employment conditions. CIWA was created in 2000 by four worker centers in Los Angeles to advance labor law enforcement in low-wage industries such as garment, restaurant, ethnic market, day labor, domestic, and janitorial work. It has been successful in partnering with the California Secretary of Labor to establish a low-wage worker advisory board of CIWA member organizations and later an Office of Low-Wage Industries to ensure compliance with state labor regulations in that growing sector of the state's economy.

Similar efforts have been undertaken in regard to enforcement of federal labor laws. The primary federal regulatory foundation for the economic rights of the immigrant working poor (including undocumented workers), is the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938, which abolished child labor in manufacturing, guaranteed a minimum wage, and established the 40-hour workweek as the national norm.

In addition to the FLSA and state wage and hour laws, worker centers attempt to make use of a range of other labor and employment laws. They help workers to file workers' compensation claims. They also work closely with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and its state counterparts and have filed numerous lawsuits under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964,



which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, sex, national origin, religion, or disability. Worker centers have also made use of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 in order to secure fair employment for workers. But employers have repeatedly sought court rulings that exempt undocumented workers from coverage under these laws, and some courts have ruled in their favor.

Despite the challenges, worker centers have had multiple successes in advocating for public policy changes. Successful efforts to win new legislation benefiting immigrant workers include the passage by the New York state legislature of a law increasing the penalties on employers for failing to pay their workers. Another important victory was New York City's adoption of a "Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights." Omaha Together One Community (OTOC) and the UFCW's efforts to organize Nebraska meatpackers was led by OTOC's successful campaign to convince that state's governor to issue a groundbreaking "Workers' Bill of Rights." It included the right to organize, the right to a safe workplace, the right to adequate facilities, the right to compensation for work performed and the right to seek state help. Finally, there have been a number of successful minimum wage and living wage campaigns on the local level. Worker centers such as Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD) in Baltimore, which pioneered the policy and passed the first living wage law in the country; the Tenants and Workers Support Committee in Alexandria, Virginia; and the Chinese Progressive Association and Young Workers United in San Francisco were leaders of these efforts.

Because they view their work through a civil rights lens, worker centers consider defending the rights of immigrant people of color and immigration reform to be as central to improving labor market outcomes for their members as any of the wage or enforcement issues highlighted above. Most of the worker centers interviewed for this study are active participants in national and state immigration reform coalitions. They have worked with the National Council of La Raza, the National Immigration Forum, the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, the National Immigration Law Center, the National Farmworker Justice Fund, the American Friends Service Committee, and many other groups. NDLO has made immigration reform an important component of its advocacy and organizing work, conducting a national discussion among day laborers and within the larger immigrant rights community about the type of reforms that would be the most helpful.

In 2003, many immigrant worker centers participated in the historic Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride sponsored in large part by Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees, which helped to organize hundreds of local events across the country and culminated in a large national rally in New York City. Many of these groups are now involved in the Fair Immigration Reform Movement (FIRM) a new national coalition for immigration reform that is being coordinated by the Center for Community Change. FIRM is also working as part of the New American Opportunity Campaign, the immigration reform effort that grew out of the Freedom Ride.

With the exception of these efforts at the national level, most worker centers' immigration rights campaigns are focused on changing policies at the state level. Frequent targets of these campaigns are laws and administrative rules limiting the rights of immigrants to obtain drivers licenses.

At the centers, immigration and employment struggles are almost always intertwined. These struggles become part of the public conversation when local residents, businesses, or municipalities move to restrict day laborers from seeking employment, for example, or when police make arrests at shape-up sites. Even the language of public debate can be biased against the immigrants' cause, as when immigrants are labeled "illegal aliens." As the debate on immigration reform becomes more contentious, centers are often called upon as the local spokespersons of a pro-immigrant point of view, speaking in opposition to anti-immigrant policies and practices and discussing the unfairness of the current immigration system. The dramatic personal stories of their hard-working members help to illustrate the immigrants' employment problems and evoke empathy. This establishes a foundation upon which a local campaign of support for federal immigration reform, and one that draws support beyond the "usual suspects," can be launched.

The centers view immigrant workers' employment, housing, and health care experiences as having as much to do with their ethnicity and status as new immigrants as it does with their class position. As a result, they view struggles against xenophobia, racism, and discrimination and the fight for immigration reform as a crucial part of improving the lives of their members. Many worker centers do not focus exclusively on labor and employment issues—or immigration issues. Their broad "social justice" agendas mandate that they also organize around racism and domestic violence, education and youth, housing and development, and health care issues.

Worker center public policy organizing and advocacy campaigns on these issues have taken a number of different forms, such as countering anti-immigrant policies in local communities and fighting for immigration reform at the national and state levels. They also include struggles against racism and discrimination in housing, education, and the allocation of social services that build bridges between immigrant workers, communities of color, and other poor and marginalized groups in American society.

Immigrant worker centers have found success in altering the public debate and raising the visibility of immigrants within the community. Although they are present in greater and greater numbers in a growing number of communities, immigrant workers are still largely invisible to the larger society. All too frequently, in public discussions of immigration and other issues surrounding low-wage immigrant labor, immigrant workers are talked about, rather than talked with. There are few mechanisms for these workers to speak on their own behalf and make their needs and opinions publicly known. Immigrant worker centers represent one vehicle through which the representation of the interests and expression of a low-wage immigrant worker point of view is taking place.

## **Service provision**

Today, almost all immigrant worker centers view service provision as a central function, but most centers focus on service provision in a broader context. They want workers to see that solutions require long-term collective action to alter the relations of power and win concrete and lasting victories. As a result, centers approach service delivery in a way that uses it to empower workers and connects service, as much as possible, to organizing. Worker centers also see the provision of highly needed services as a major way to recruit potential members and leaders to the centers.

The range of service provided by centers is extensive. They include direct services such as help with filing wage claims, “English as a second language” (ESL) classes, and other immigration-related assistance. They also include referrals for health care and connecting workers with services provided by other agencies. While legal assistance and ESL classes are the most common services provided, individual centers tailor their offerings to specific needs of their local areas.

Another form of service provided by immigrant worker centers is aimed at legal assistance to fight the many violations of wage and hour laws faced by low-wage workers. A particularly necessary form of legal help is assistance with filing and pursuing claims for unpaid wages. It is the one in greatest demand, and also often the most developed aspect of the centers’ service work. On average, each worker center collects between \$100,000 and \$200,000 a year in back wages for workers. Several centers have won million-dollar lawsuits for workers. Although time-consuming, collection of back wages has proven an effective strategy for the redress of wrongs in low-wage industries.

After legal aid, the most common service offered by many worker centers is English language courses. Most combine teaching the English language itself with presenting information and fostering discussions that encourage participants to think critically and analytically about society and their own places within it. Classes often cover the rights of immigrants and workers as well as organizing approaches and techniques. Some centers—especially those that work with day laborers and housekeepers—tailor their English classes to the development of vocabulary useful to particular industries.

Health care forms another component of immigrant worker center service offerings. Immigrant worker centers offer three primary health services: health education, referral services for immigrants to health clinics and other health-related services, and, in some cases, on-site health care. Related to these offerings is another service centers provide—assistance with identification papers and banking. Undocumented workers, increasingly prevented from obtaining drivers licenses and seldom possessing passports, struggle to access health and other service programs that require identification. Many centers provide laminated photo identification cards to members. A number of centers have helped workers open their first bank accounts by negotiating arrangements with area banks to accept identification cards and waive minimum deposit requirements. Some centers also offer no-cost check-cashing services to members, sometimes in cooperation with area banks.

The biggest dilemma worker centers are facing with regard to service provision is how much time and resources to devote to it, given that they believe that long-term change will only come about through organizing. Responses to this dilemma vary. Some centers have forged a strong connection between legal cases, organizing, and direct action. Some require workers to take courses on workers’ rights and to become involved in organizing in exchange for legal help. The individual workers involved gain valuable experience and inspiration from this organizing and action, but the effort can sometimes distract centers from more strategic organizing approaches. And centers also find that many workers who initially come for legal aid do not remain involved as active participants in the centers beyond the duration of their cases.

Additional research and investigation is needed to determine the feasibility of worker centers offering financial services like check-wiring. A number of worker centers are already providing legal aid,

check-cashing, small loans, and help with filling out tax and immigration applications, but do not charge for any of these services. The worlds of third-sector social entrepreneurship—in which non-profits create income streams to support their work—and immigrant worker centers are at present quite removed from one another, but it would be exciting to explore ways of bringing them together with the goal of creating a steady income stream for the centers. There is also new interest in the United States, given the large numbers of immigrants sending money back to their home countries, in “banking the unbanked.” This could be an opportunity for worker centers to negotiate mutually beneficial relationships with banks on behalf of their constituents that might generate much-needed income for the centers.

## **Leadership development and popular education**

For many worker centers, leadership development is critical to their mission. It has become one of the greatest strengths of the worker center movement; there is a vibrant leadership core at the heart of these organizations. And while the membership bases of worker centers are significantly smaller than most union locals, the proportion of members who take an active part in the organizing efforts at worker centers is quite impressive.

Leadership development often begins with helping workers transform the way they see themselves. The fight for a positive self-definition for day laborers is a good example. Traditionally, the Spanish word for day labor, “jornalero,” has been a pejorative one, not only in the United States but in Latin American countries as well. The Los Angeles day laborer organizing efforts through the Instituto De Educacion Popular del Sur de California (IDEPSCA), the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), and the nascent day laborer movement they helped found—the National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON)—have successfully worked to transform the term into a positive one, an expression of pride in workers’ labor and their occupational community.

Worker centers strive to involve, train, and promote organizational leaders and activists from within the ranks of the low-wage immigrant worker community. In particular, this means developing the ability of members to represent themselves before the media, public officials, and employers; to recruit and lead other workers; and to choose issues and develop campaigns. In addition, many worker centers work to create a culture of democratic governance and decision-making that promotes leadership development. In place of just making decisions themselves, staff members foster expectations on the part of workers that decisions will be made consultatively and collectively.

The Workplace Project in Long Island, for example, is run by a seven-member board of directors elected entirely from the ranks of its membership. When the Project mounted a statewide campaign for an unpaid wage bill that members drafted themselves, the organization viewed the campaign as a way for members and leaders to gain experience. This meant having the immigrant workers themselves—and not the English-speaking staff or well-meaning allies—take the lead.

Real participation in leadership activity begins with the mastery of critical thinking skills. A number of the centers utilize a popular education approach that originated in Central and South American liberation movements. Workshops, classes, and discussions are designed to get workers talking and thinking not just about the way things are, but how they got that way and how they could be different.

Most centers, for example, offer a workers' rights course that provides basic information about how U.S. employment and social welfare laws work. For example, immigrant workers learn that minimum wage and overtime laws apply to all workers, regardless of whether they have legal working papers. Workers are also taught that organizing at the workplace is protected under the law and that it is illegal for workers to be fired for organizing, whether they are documented or undocumented.

In classes organized by the Workplace Project, for example, speakers are brought in from government agencies like the state Department of Labor and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), as well as from unions, other worker centers, and local universities. All class sessions follow a popular education pedagogy and, wherever possible, draw insights and opinions from the students themselves. Teachers and facilitators work to point out the discrepancy between theory and practice, between the law on the books and what happens to workers in reality. They always try to connect these disjunctures back to the need for organizing.

The classes are structured so that before the students hear from the "experts" they identify their own experiences with a subject, like occupational safety and health. They are asked to discuss hazards at their own workplaces and use this context to learn about the laws that are on the books. By the time the "experts" arrive, students are primed to ask the tough questions and not just to accept expert presentations at face value. In this way, the organization consciously follows a "Frierian" pedagogy aimed at developing the students' critical analytical skills.

For IDEPSCA, the Garment Workers Center, and the Workplace Project, as well as many other centers, another component of developing members' critical skills and capacity to act is political education. These centers have worked to develop curriculum that provides members with tools to talk about complex issues other than labor and immigration laws. Here, too, the idea is to give workers information and help them formulate questions, as opposed to telling them what they should think. Examples of topics studied include issues surrounding globalization and trade policies. Discussions are geared to participants whose consciousness is shaped by their experience in two worlds—the United States and the countries from which they came.

## **Worker centers' unique role**

In the face of widespread exploitation, low wages, and scanty health benefits, immigrant, Latino, Asian, African American and other workers in communities across the United States today are in desperate need of help and opportunities for self-organization. The difficult conditions under which low-wage immigrant workers currently toil are the result of a "perfect storm" of labor laws that have ceased to protect workers, little-effective labor market regulation of new economic structures, and a national immigration policy that has created a permanent underclass of workers. In addition to the problems posed by outmoded labor laws and little-effective labor market regulation, low wage African American workers face a legacy of systemic racism in structures of education, employment and housing across many decades. In their tripartite efforts toward immigration reform and confronting institutionalized racism and discrimination, labor market policy change, and worker organizing, worker centers are attempting to address all three of these inclement conditions.

Immigrant worker centers attract those workers who are often the hardest to organize and for whom current unions by and large do not offer a viable option. The vast majority of worker center members and beneficiaries 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 industries in which immigrant worker center laborers operate and most of the communities in which they live are segregated by race and ethnicity. Race and ethnicity, as much and sometimes more than occupation or industry, determine the life situations of many immigrant workers. As a result, these are the central lenses through which worker centers recruit members, formulate collective responses, and analyze the economic organization of society at large as well as their local labor markets.

Center leaders and members bring experiences and organizing traditions from their countries of origin and maintain these ties through regular contact with home-country organizations. In doing so, they bring together ideas, organizing traditions, and strategies from immigrants' home countries as well as the United States. International issues such as globalization and sweatshop opposition are closely integrated into the ongoing work of most immigrant worker centers.

Although they share many of the same goals, worker centers do not conform to a single organizational model. Because of this, centers can be seen through a variety of theoretical lenses—as social movement organizations, labor market institutions, or a new organizational form that is a combination of the two. Different centers are evolving in different directions, following a multitude of organizational paths. It is too early to tell whether a common model will ultimately emerge. Immigrant worker centers act as “organizing laboratories,” creating and testing new and innovative strategies. Centers are pioneering a range of approaches for improving wages and conditions of work across low-wage labor markets and industries. These pilot efforts include working to be able to hold corporations legally responsible for the actions of their sub-contractors, pressuring individual employers to change practices through coordinated local and national actions and boycotts, organizing to raise wages across an industry, and targeting industries to raise wages or provide health benefits through passage of public policy.

The prevailing wisdom of contemporary business schools is that the most effective firms are those that operate as “learning organizations,” constantly evaluating their work, taking stock of changes in the broader environment in which they are functioning, learning from their mistakes, and shifting gears when something doesn't work. In conversations with worker center leaders and staff, one is often struck by their willingness to acknowledge what they didn't know and what isn't working and by their openness to trying new approaches. In a context where it is still not clear which strategies will prove most effective, this openness to rethinking is critical.

## **The internal life of worker centers**

The orientation of worker centers toward long-term change inclines these groups to a strong focus on the internal life of their organizations. Centers view the leadership development and political education of a

base of workers as among the most important “products” of their work. In an era during which *Bowling Alone*—Robert Putnam’s description of a hobbled civil society in which fewer and fewer Americans are actively participating—became a bestseller, immigrant worker centers provide a striking counterpoint to the status quo. In contrast to national trends, they are engaging healthy numbers of people of very modest means on an ongoing basis.

For many worker centers, democratic deliberation and decision-making within the center are seen as equally worthy of attention as external organizing. Thus, understanding the inner life of worker centers is essential to understanding the overall phenomenon. Still relatively new, the structures and practices of most immigrant worker centers are continually evolving. Nonetheless, certain organizational cultures, structures, habits, and patterns of behavior are already manifest. Among the most important of these is the great emphasis placed on leadership development, popular education, and membership empowerment.

In general, immigrant worker centers are a mixture of the formal and the informal, of organization and movement. On one hand, they have nonprofit tax status, boards of directors, full-time staff, programs, services, classes and trainings, and sophisticated foundation fundraising techniques. These are all formal activities conducted by formalized, structured organizations. On the other hand, although centers have small formal membership bases, they have large numbers of constituents who participate in center activities, no reliable and consistent system for dues collection, loose networks, and minimal administrative infrastructures. These characteristics are reflective of a more informal, “movement” culture.

### ***Membership***

Many centers do not view membership size as a central measurement of organizational strength or power (most worker centers have memberships of 500 persons or less). This lack of emphasis on building up large numbers of formal members is in part a reflection of the organizational origins of the centers—most do not come out of union or community organizing traditions, which place a high premium on membership-building. Instead, most centers developed out of organizations that were service providers, ethnic non-governmental organizations, or social movement organizations.

Issues of membership also arise in relation to levels of activity. For some centers, “members” as counted in formal membership numbers are really more accurately understood as the active core of grassroots volunteers and leaders of the organizations rather than of how many workers actually use the centers or come out to actions and events. Centers also have enormous trouble keeping up-to-date records and collecting dues. Most centers are not worksite-based and do not engage in collective bargaining. As a result, they do not have a union-style system in which dues are deducted from workers’ paychecks by employers, and most centers have not yet figured out other mechanisms for reliable dues collection.

As noted, the majority of worker centers treats membership as a privilege that workers attain through participation and that is attached to specific responsibilities and duties. Membership is not automatically extended to anyone who attends an event, comes to the center, or receives a service. Centers often require workers to complete a course on workers’ rights, participate in other training

sessions, serve on a committee, or volunteer a specified number of hours over a certain period of time as a condition of becoming a member.

Belief in the need to have a dues-paying membership base in the worker center world can be best understood on a continuum. It runs from those who either do not view dues as important or see them as unfeasible to, on the other end of the spectrum, those who feel very strongly that dues are critically important and have made efforts (or at least plans) to expand and consolidate their base. Hence, there are three very different reasons why centers are not farther along in having sizeable dues-paying membership bases: Some groups aren't sure they believe in it on principle, some groups just don't think it is realistic, and others believe in it but haven't figured out how to do it consistently.

Concerns about membership and dues collection are not unreasonable. Centers have not yet figured out how to formalize membership and may never do so. They work with constituencies who live day to day with tremendous fear and work at very low wages; they face a constant struggle to identify tactics and strategies that will be effective for workers who have very little economic and political power, many with limited legal rights. Centers themselves have much looser structures than the more established organizational bureaucracies of labor unions.

On the other hand, like the civil rights movement centers of the past, which often lacked formal structures and memberships, centers are strongly tied to immigrant communities, boasting an impressive cadre of leaders and an ability to mobilize followers. They are important hubs in local and regional low-wage worker and immigration networks, with a history of initiating strategies and campaigns.

Overall, the active participation of worker center members is one of their greatest strengths. However, when in terms of their ambition to be labor market institutions that are effecting firm and industry behavior directly, the modest size of formal membership becomes a significant weakness.

### ***Staff, budgets, and fundraising***

At several centers, former leaders are now long-time members of the staff, a good sign that the difficult and often unsuccessful transition from volunteer to staff, or leader to organizer, has worked. At most of the centers, there are a majority of immigrants and people of color on staff—quite an accomplishment in and of itself. Many also demonstrate an unusually diverse staff in terms of class composition. Staffs are usually quite small, with most centers employing five or fewer employees. Given how small they are, center staff often operate as “jacks of all trades,” doing a bit of everything from fundraising to administrative work, legal work, organizing, and advocacy.

Worker centers have very small budgets and (as with most small non-profits) the vast majority of their funds go to paying modest staff salaries and covering center overhead. With the exception of a few with trailers, very few of the centers own their own buildings, although drives are currently underway at the Chinese Progressive Association in Boston and the Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee in Virginia. Some use office space donated by religious organizations, but the vast majority of centers are not in subsidized situations.

Centers have become skilled at raising money from outside sources, including structuring themselves to be able to receive funds, learning how to write effective proposals, and identifying potential



financial donors. Most funds come from foundations. The balance comes from government (primarily going to day laborer centers), earned income, and grassroots fundraising, with a tiny amount also coming from dues. The vast majority of these funds is generated by the centers' organizing and advocacy work. Although service provision is a central activity of worker centers, very little of foundation money is raised specifically for funding social services.

But over-reliance on foundation funding is problematic for several reasons. First, organizations that begin with a model that is funded from outside sources are not forced from the beginning to ask for significant commitments from members. Second, this source of funding is not sustainable for the long haul. Foundations are unpredictable; their priorities change and the amount they give out sometimes varies with the performance of the market in a particular year. When income is unpredictable from year to year, planning and implementing for the longer-term is difficult. In addition, many have the equivalent of a "five years and out" rule, whereby they do not fund any one organization for more than five years at a time. Third, centers are forced to constantly be on the lookout for new foundation sources of support, sometimes taking on programs to make them eligible for particular grants even when adding the new activity does not fit with the rest of the organizational goals.

To support their drive toward greater financial stability and self-sufficiency, foundation and internal organizational resources ought to be devoted to developing and refining effective models and methods for dues collection as well as income-generating activities. As a follow-up to the study, the Center for Community Change is researching and compiling information on a variety of dues-collection systems from a range of organizations within the non-profit sector in the United States.

### ***Networks and connections***

Although there is not yet a single overarching national network or association that brings together all 139 worker centers under a single umbrella, individual centers are imbedded in a variety of national, regional, state, and local networks and coalitions. Few of these are sector-specific; most bring groups together around specific issues like labor law and immigration reform or contingent work. A small number are explicitly focused on providing a range of technical assistance to members.

One of the larger networks of worker centers is the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, which has 29 day-laborer organizations as affiliates. Organizations in California, Washington, and Oregon began working together in 1998 under the auspices of CHIRLA and IDEPSCA when they realized that many of the workers were all part of the same migrant rotation and that they were struggling with many of the same issues. For the next few years, organizers and leaders traveled between the centers sharing ideas, a collaboration that eventually led to the founding of the formal network.

Since their founding in 2001, NDLO has brought together day-laborer centers from all over the country to share experiences, increase the participation of day laborers in the operation of the centers and organizing work, and help set up new centers. In 2004, the organization grew from one to five staff members. NDLO now provides a wide range of technical assistance to affiliates. Services include challenging anti-day-laborer solicitation ordinances in federal court, assisting in the process of transitioning informal day-laborer gathering corners to official and orderly worker centers, strengthening the processes of disci-

pline at worker centers and corners, and educating and building relationships with public officials. NDLON also helps in resolving conflicts with other groups, building relationships with Home Depot, connecting member organizations to potential funders, and creating a leadership development curriculum.

While there are a number of cities that are home to a cluster of worker centers, only a few have strong ongoing networks. For a time, San Francisco had a loose network of worker centers called the Labor Immigrant Organizing Network (LION). Chicago Interfaith is in the process of bringing together a worker center network that would be comprised of its two worker centers and three others. There is a small informal network of worker centers and allies in Miami. New York City has a high concentration of worker centers, but while there are close working relationships between small groups of centers, there is no citywide network that brings all of these groups together.

By far, the most mature and vibrant local network of worker centers and their allies is in Los Angeles. Here there is also a strong network of legal and policy advocacy organizations that provide support to workers centers. The Los Angeles worker center network includes the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California, which was very involved in the landmark El Monte slave labor case and in the founding of the Garment Worker Center. It also includes Sweatshop Watch, which was the Garment Workers' fiscal sponsor and continues to work closely with the organization on state, federal, and international issues, and the Downtown Labor Center at UCLA, which has organized workshops and forums on topics of interest to centers.

ENLACE has created a powerful ongoing solidarity network between groups in the United States and Mexico. It brings together 26 local low-wage worker organizing projects in the United States and Mexico, including unions, community organizations, and 10 worker centers. It provides training specifically tailored to community-based worker organizing projects, ongoing technical assistance, access to national conferences, and other networking opportunities. Through ENLACE's contacts and campaigns, a number of worker centers have been introduced to union organizers and leaders in the *maquiladoras* and have undertaken many different solidarity efforts on their behalf. The Mexican and U.S. organizations pool their knowledge on multinational firms in different industries and have occasionally coordinated activities on joint targets. ENLACE's signature focus is on training and technical assistance that emphasize "organizational regeneration"—maintaining and expanding a healthy leadership core team inside of each group.

Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) has nine worker centers that are directly affiliated with it, three more that are under development, and several others that have attended events and training sessions. IWJ provides ongoing organizational development, organizing, legislative, and fundraising support to its affiliates and has played a leadership role in forming coalitions with state and federal government agencies, including working closely with the federal Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division. Finally, the national networks that are most frequently mentioned as coalition partners by worker centers are the Center for Community Change, Jobs With Justice, and the National Organizers Alliance.

Despite the valiant efforts of these groups, worker centers overall are under-networked at every level, but especially when it comes to state and local partnerships. One project that would particularly prove helpful would be an online clearinghouse for ongoing communication, resource-sharing, and networking. Organizations would benefit enormously from reading each other's grant proposals, promo-

tional materials, and the written protocols and practices of other legal clinics serving the immigrant community. The same is true in terms of drafting legislation and working to improve coordination and enforcement with government agencies. Polling organizations about what information they are most interested in and compiling and posting the results could be a crucial first step toward developing a national electronic network of worker center practices. Another way of using technology to connect worker centers across the country would be to explore the use of electronic listservs devoted to common program areas or organizing projects.

As a result of recommendations drawn from the National Immigrant Worker Center Study, the National Employment Law Project (NELP) is now actively pursuing support to create such a clearinghouse. In addition, under the auspices of ENLACE, several centers have come together to pursue joint fundraising.

## **Next steps in relationship-building**

Worker centers are taking on conditions at the very bottom of the labor market on behalf of workers who have very limited exposure to other forms of organization. Centers have very little access to research about firm behavior within and among individual industries. Even if permanent organization among these workers is not possible, center campaigns could certainly benefit from a central or regional resource for labor market and industry research. Such a centralized home-base could help with labor market and industry research, targeted analysis and strategy development, and provision of training for worker center staffs. Particularly if centers do decide that they want to try to move in the direction of becoming more established labor market institutions, this kind of unity is a necessity. In addition, such a central resource could help centers give more thought to coordinating collective action regionally or nationally against specific employers or industries.

Worker centers could also benefit from closer cooperation with unions. Unions have an established paradigm for organizing and representing workers, a capacity for industry analysis, and deep knowledge of labor law. In addition, they have experience with direct economic-action organizing campaigns in the face of employer opposition and the financial and staff resources to support workers through organizing drives. Their membership numbers give them the political capacity and economic leverage that is essential to winning organizing campaigns. Worker centers can benefit from this knowledge and power, and closer relations with unions should be a priority. Unions in turn can learn from worker centers about how to work in and relate to the growing low-wage immigrant labor sector. Worker centers are playing an important role in holding unions accountable for representing their immigrant members. One first step in moving forward is arranging national, regional, and local dialogues between worker centers and unions. These will enable both sides to hear more about how each approaches their work, visit each other's headquarters, and tour each other's projects. This new dialogue will help identify the tensions that exist, create a set of guiding principles and ground rules for working together, and, most importantly, look for concrete projects on which to partner. The Center for Community Change has held discussions with the AFL-CIO about how they might work together to facilitate some of these conversations and is currently organizing a series of presentations of the study to labor audiences around the country.

## Conclusion

While worker centers face significant challenges, they are also uniquely poised to meet the challenges of today's low-wage workforce. They offer a critical mix of services (to meet some of the immediate needs of these workers), advocacy (to place the problems of immigrant workers on the public agenda), and organizing (to empower workers to take collective action on their own behalf). These centers are an important component of the newly emerging gateway infrastructure that is providing support to what has numerically now surpassed the Golden Era as the largest influx of foreign workers in the nation's history. New economic structures, a profound absence of labor market regulation, and an immigration policy that banishes so many to the shadows all pose formidable challenges to these developing institutions.

While immigrant worker centers are struggling to build real economic power, they are succeeding at providing an ongoing vehicle for the collective voice of workers at the very bottom of the wage scale. Most of their successes at broad labor market intervention have so far come via public policy rather than direct pressure on firms and industries. Worker centers have clearly not obviated the need for massive unionization of low-wage immigrant workers. But most unions today are also struggling to succeed at broad labor market intervention, particularly in scattered site industries that do not rely on public sources of funding.

Through their advocacy and organizing work, immigrant worker centers have excelled at redefining issues so that the centers are viewed as appropriate advocates for public policy intervention. They are altering the terms of debate and changing the way people understand the world around them, the problems faced by the low-wage worker community, and the possibilities for change. This work is instrumental to a brighter future for immigrant workers in the United States.

As Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward write, "If the distribution of power simply reflected other structured inequalities, then political challenges from below would always be without effect. The realm of power and politics would inevitably reiterate other inequalities....If people without wealth or status or technical skill sometimes prevail, then they must have some kind of power." The history of the labor and civil rights movements tell us that they are right.

"People have potential power, the ability to make others do what they want," Piven and Cloward go on, "when those others depend on them for the contributions they make to the interdependent relations that are social life. Their power, the power of people we ordinarily consider powerless, derives from the patterns of interdependence that constitute social life, and from the leverage embedded in interdependent relations." (Piven and Cloward, forthcoming). The challenge for immigrant worker centers is to clearly identify the leverage that low-wage immigrant workers have, develop a consciousness about that leverage within their organizations, and implement strategies that take full advantage of it.

—September 2005

## Appendix: Worker centers by state, 2004

\* Participated in survey

\*\* Participated in in-depth case study

### Arizona

Central Arizona Shelter Services (CASS), Phoenix  
Primavera Workers, Tucson  
Tonatierra, Phoenix

### Arkansas

Northwest Arkansas Workers' Center, Bentonville \*

### California

Asian Immigrant Women Advocates, Oakland  
Central American Resource Center (CARCEN),  
Los Angeles  
Centro Laboral de Graton, Graton  
Centro Legal de la Raza, Oakland  
Chinese Worker Organizing Center (Chinese  
Progressive Association), San Francisco \*  
Citizenship Project, Salinas \*  
Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los  
Angeles (CHIRLA), Los Angeles \*\*  
Day Worker Center at Calvary Church, Mountain View  
Domestic Workers Home Care Center, United  
Domestic Workers, San Diego  
FOCUS/Filipino Community Support, San Jose  
Garment Worker Center (GWC), Los Angeles \*\*  
Hermandad Mexicana Latinoamericana, Santa Ana  
Iglesia San Pedro, Fallbrook  
Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California  
(IDEPSCA), Los Angeles \*\*  
Instituto Laboral de la Raza, San Francisco \*  
Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA),  
Los Angeles \*\*  
La Raza Centro Legal/San Francisco Day Laborer  
Program, San Francisco  
Maintenance Industry Cooperation Trust Fund,  
Los Angeles  
Malibu Community Labor Exchange (MCLE), Malibu \*  
Mujeres Unidas y Activas, San Francisco \*  
National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON)  
Organización de Trabajadores Agrícolas de California,  
Stockton  
People Organized to Win Employment Rights  
(POWER), San Francisco \*  
Pilipino Workers' Center, Los Angeles \*  
Pomona Day Laborer Center, Pomona \*  
Support Committee for Maquiladora Workers,  
San Diego  
The Temporary Workers Employment Project/Working  
Partnerships USA, San Jose  
Unión Sin Fronteras, Coachella

Watsonville Law Center—Agricultural Workers Access  
to Health Project, Watsonville

### Colorado

El Centro Humanitario para los Trabajadores, Denver

### District of Columbia

DC Employment Justice Center, Washington \*

### Florida

Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), Immokalee \*  
Farmworker Association of Florida (FWAF), Apopka \*  
Farmworker Network for Economic and  
Environmental Justice, Apopka  
Miami Worker Center, Miami  
South Florida Interfaith Committee for Worker  
Justice—Miami Workers' Rights Initiative  
UNITE for Dignity, Miami \*

### Illinois

Albany Park Workers' Center, Chicago  
Centro de Derechos Humanos Simón Bolívar, Elgin  
Chicago Area Workers' Center, Chicago  
Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, Chicago  
Chicago Home Care Organizing Project (CHOP),  
Chicago  
Chicago Interfaith Workers' Rights Center, Chicago \*\*  
Latino Union of Chicago, Chicago  
San Lucas Worker Center, Chicago \*

### Indiana

St. Joseph Valley Project—Indiana Interfaith Workers'  
Rights Center, South Bend  
Workers' Project, Inc., Ft. Wayne

### Maine

Maine Rural Workers Coalition, Lewiston \*

### Maryland

Casa de Maryland, Takoma Park \*  
Casa Obrera, Baltimore  
Centro de Empleo Trabajadores Hacia el Progreso  
(worker center), Takoma Park  
Centro de Empleo y Liderazgo, East Silver Spring

### Massachusetts

Brazilian Immigrant Center, Allston \*  
Chinese Progressive Association/Workers Center,  
Boston \*

Merrimack Valley Project Worker Center, Lawrence  
Pioneer Valley Workers Center, Springfield  
SEIU Local #615, Voice and Future Worker Center,  
Boston

### **Michigan**

Michigan Organizing Project (MOP), Kalamazoo

### **Minnesota**

Centro Campesino, Owatonna  
Resource Center of the Americas, Minneapolis \*  
Twin Cities Religion and Labor Network (TCRLN),  
Minneapolis

### **Mississippi**

Mississippi Poultry Workers Center, Morton \*  
Mississippi Workers Center for Human Rights,  
Greenville

### **Montana**

Working for Equality and Economic Liberation  
(WEEL), Helena \*

### **Nebraska**

Omaha Together One Community (OTOC), Omaha \*\*

### **Nevada**

Alliance for Workers' Rights, Reno \*

### **New Jersey**

Casa Freehold, Freehold  
Comité de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas,  
Glassboro  
New Labor, New Brunswick \*  
United Labor Agency/Bergen County Day Laborer  
Project, Paramus  
Wind of the Spirit, Morristown \*

### **New York**

Andolan Organizing South Asian Workers (LIC),  
New York  
Capital District Workers' Center, Albany  
Centro de Hospitalidad, New York  
Centro Independiente de Trabajadores Agrícolas  
(CITA), Florida  
Chinese Staff and Workers' Association (CSWA),  
New York  
Coalición Hispana de Ossining, Ossining  
Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence—  
Women Workers Project, New York  
Community Voices Heard, New York \*  
Cortland Workers' Rights Board, Cortland  
Damayan Migrant Workers Association, New York  
Domestic Workers United, New York

Filipino Workers Center, New York  
Hispanic Resource Center of Larchmont and  
Mamaroneck, Mamaroneck  
Hispanic Westchester Coalition, White Plains  
Latino Workers Center (LWC), New York  
Mexican American Workers Association  
Neighbors' Link, New York  
New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA),  
New York \*\*  
Proyecto de los Trabajadores Latinoamericanos,  
New York  
Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York  
(ROCNYS), New York \*  
Work Experience Program (WEP)/Workers Together!  
(WWT!), New York  
Workers' Awaaz, New York  
Workplace Project, Hempstead \*\*

### **North Carolina**

Beloved Community Center, Greensboro  
Black Workers for Justice, Rocky Mount  
Eastern North Carolina Interfaith Workers Rights  
Center, Red Springs  
North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project  
(NCOSH), Durham \*  
Poultry Workers Project/Center for Women's  
Economic Alternatives (CWEA), Murfreesboro  
Southerners for Economic Justice, Durham  
Western North Carolina Interfaith Workers Rights  
Center, Morganton

### **Ohio**

Day Laborers' Organizing Committee, Cleveland  
Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC),  
AFL-CIO, Toledo  
Cincinnati Interfaith Workers' Justice Center,  
Cincinnati

### **Oregon**

Centro Cultural, Cornelius  
Enlace, Portland  
Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noreste, Woodburn \*  
VOZ, Portland \*

### **Pennsylvania**

Heartland Labor Capital Network c/o Steel Valley  
Authority, Duquesne \*  
Immigration Resource Center, AFL-CIO, Philadelphia  
Philadelphia Unemployment Project, Philadelphia \*

### **Rhode Island**

Dare to Win—Direct Action for Rights & Equality,  
Providence  
United Workers Committee, Center Falls \*

**South Carolina**

Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment (CAFÉ),  
Greenville \*\*

**Texas**

Border Agricultural Workers Project/Union de  
Trabajadores Agricolas Fronterizos (UTAF), El Paso  
Central Texas Immigrant Workers' Rights Center  
(CTIWorc), Austin \*  
Fuerza Unida, San Antonio \*  
Gulfton Area Neighborhood Organization (GANO),  
Houston \*  
Harris County AFL-CIO, Justice & Equality in the  
Workplace Program (JEWPP), Houston  
La Mujer Obrera, El Paso  
Southwest Public Workers' Union (SPWU),  
San Antonio \*

**Utah**

Justice, Economic Dignity and Independence for  
Women (JEDI), Salt Lake City

**Vermont**

Vermont Workers' Center, Montpelier

**Virginia**

Coal Employment Project, Tazwell  
Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee (TWSC),  
Alexandria \*\*  
Virginia Justice Center for Farm and Immigrant  
Workers, Charlottesville  
Virginia Justice Center for Farm and Immigrant  
Workers, Falls Church

**Washington**

Casa Latina, Seattle \*  
Filipino Workers Action Center, Seattle  
Washington Alliance of Technology Workers  
(WASHTECH/CWA), Seattle  
Washington Farmworkers Union, Granger

**Wisconsin**

9 to 5, National Association of Working Women,  
Milwaukee  
Faith Community for Worker Justice—Milwaukee  
Interfaith Workers' Rights Center, Milwaukee  
Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice of South Central  
Wisconsin, Madison  
Voces de la Frontera, Milwaukee

## Endnotes

1. In his 2004 study of jobs and activism in the African American community, scholar Steven Pitts wanted to understand why the immigrant worker center strategy has not by and large had a counterpart in the black community. First, he argues that the crisis around work in black communities is too often exclusively defined as a problem of high unemployment, and not also as a problem of bad jobs, which Pitts describes as “jobs that pay poorly; jobs with few benefits; jobs that offer no protection from employer harassment; jobs whose only future is a dead-end.” Pitts found that responses to the crisis of bad jobs in the black community and the racially polarized nature of job markets often focused on individual skills development as opposed to putting forward a more systemic critique of the problem and strategies for transforming bad jobs on a larger scale. Those organizations that do take up the issues of jobs “do not attempt to improve the jobs held by black workers. Instead the emphasis is on the individualized provision of job readiness counseling, soft skills and hard skills.” Pitts posits several other reasons for what he calls the “lack of transformative responses to the job crisis.” These include a tendency for the African American freedom movement to focus on issues of ownership and control over assets rather than employer-employee relationships and the integration of African Americans into existing government agencies (Pitts 2004).

2. Plotke (1999) makes a critical distinction between “political incorporation” and “inclusion” or “assimilation”: “[The latter] terms suggest less conflict and disagreement than is common in political entry—to be assimilated or included in a polity seems almost to be absorbed into it. ‘Incorporation’ is a better term because it indicates both inclusion and the formation of the group that is being incorporated. To say that a group has been incorporated into a polity signals the formation of that group as a new and distinctive part of the polity. This implies change in the polity and the possibility of conflict between the new group and other political agents.”

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