
BUILDING EFFECTIVE SOCIAL CHANGE ORGANIZATIONS

New “Unity Unions” Self-Organize to Confront Workplace Abuses

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The last five years have been grim and isolating ones for immigrants and working people, right? Overall, this may be the case, but if you talk with organizers at Fuerza Laboral, an independent workers’ center in Rhode Island founded in 2006, you might get a different impression.

Despite difficult times, the group has taken on some bold and determined organizing. And they have some important victories to show for their efforts.

“Fuerza’s roots are really and truly the essence of what the labor movement is: workers organizing themselves and getting together with their communities to identify some real injustices that are systemic throughout the country,” says Josie Shagwert, the group’s executive director. “They got together to say, ‘How can we put a stop to this? Because the system is failing us.’”

Not long ago, workers’ centers were seen as service providers, staff-driven organizations where individuals could go to have caseworkers help with their problems. That has changed over the past decade, and the Rhode Island group is part of the transformation. “Fuerza Laboral builds worker power,” the organization’s web site explains. “[We] organize to end exploitation in the workplace. We train workers in their rights, develop new community leaders, and take direct action against injustice to achieve real victories.”

This work sounds a lot like what unions do. And, yet, Fuerza Laboral is not formally affiliated with the labor movement. Instead, it is an affiliate of National People’s Action (NPA), and shares with other NPA members an organizing model rooted in communities. Fuerza Laboral’s campaigns show two things: why organizing among workers remains essential, and how the labor movement still has work to do in bridging the gap between its traditional practices and new groups doing cutting-edge organizing, especially among immigrants and low-wage workers.

What Good Are Laws Without the Power to Enforce Them?

When Fuerza Laboral first started organizing, it focused on the abuses of temp agencies in

Rhode Island, “employers who were underpaying, not paying, taking illegal deductions,” Shagwert says. Having first coalesced around this industry, the group soon moved to take on other businesses with unjust labor practices – notably a local manufacturer called Colibri. On a cold morning in January 2009, some 280 workers showed up for work at the Colibri jewelry factory, a nonunion shop in East Providence. They found a handwritten sign taped to the factory door reading, “Plant Is Closed. Go Home.”

“Shock turned to anger pretty quickly,” says Shagwert, “with people asking, What kind of treatment is this? People had worked there for 5, 15, 20 years.” One of the workers called a local Spanish-speaking radio station and complained on the air about the closing. The radio host suggested that he get in touch with Fuerza Laboral.

“For the first meeting they had 12 people,” Shagwert says. “By the time they got together for a second meeting there were 60 people in the living room of one of the workers, crowded in to talk about what to do and what an organizing campaign would look like.”

The group discovered that Colibri’s closing violated the federal Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act (WARN), which mandates that any business with 100 or more employees must give 60-days notice before closing. (The WARN Act was in the news during the December 2008 occupation of the Republic Windows factory by the Chicago company’s laid-off workers, which Kari Lydersen chronicles in her book “Revolt on Goose Island.”) The law affords an important protection for employees. Unfortunately, there is no federal agency to enforce it. The Colibri workers decided that they would take it upon themselves to make the company obey the law.

“The vast majority of those workers had never organized before,” Shagwert says. Yet, in the course of the campaign, they pulled together a 250-person rally at the Colibri site and also began engaging in direct action. “The workers practiced civil disobedience at the auctions [of company assets],” says Shagwert, “which resulted in 13 people getting arrested.”

During the action, one observer told the local NBC affiliate, “I’d like to see them get justice ... This is another AIG deal. The rich get richer, and the workers get the shaft.”

The activists subsequently brought 100 people to the headquarters of the private equity firm in New York that had purchased the company, and workers held a sit-in in the firm’s lobby. “As a result of all those actions,” Shagwert explains, “a prominent labor lawyer in Rhode Island, Marc Gursky, felt inspired by this grassroots surge of energy. He stepped forward and said, ‘I know that to enforce the WARN Act you are going to need a lawyer.’”

For two years, Fuerza Laboral pursued the case in court, and it ultimately reached a settlement. The precise terms of the agreement have not yet been made public. Nevertheless, Shagwert notes, “I will say that the workers felt really happy that after two years they were vindicated.”

“Unity” and Unions

Fuerza Laboral’s efforts show why, even with only 7 percent of workers in the private sector of the American economy covered by traditional unions, there is no substitute for organizing among working people. Even with pro-employee laws on the books, there is little hope of justice without a grassroots demand. Prior to the labor laws enshrined in the New Deal, mutual aid among workers was the very essence of union life. With collective bargaining in decline,

the revival of this type of action may be important for labor's future as well.

Asked what Fuerza Laboral takes from the organizing model of National People's Action, the national coalition of which it is a member, Shagwert says, "Networking and constantly building leadership. It's a real belief that everyone who belongs to your organization, or wants to belong, has the potential to take leadership."

In addition to developing leadership through their campaigns, Fuerza Laboral has also actively pursued a program of political education. "The essence of Fuerza Laboral is having the passion to develop leaders who will confront social injustice," says Heiny Maldonado, a community organizer at the group. "We have a year-round calendar of trainings for our members and leaders."

Shagwert adds: "Since 2006, we have put at least 3,000 workers through a really aggressive popular education model within which our members and leaders get trained to teach basic workers rights. We also hold democracy schools: a multi-week school that teaches about organizing, the history of the labor movement, and the history of immigration. Many of our leaders have come through those courses. They take a course, get fired up, and then we look for ways to plug them into the regular organizing we do. That feels like a huge victory."

If there's going to be a progressive revival in this country, having a broadly inclusive approach to worker education and developing community leadership will be just as important to traditional unions as they are to workers' centers. Currently, the labor movement is engaged in efforts to reach out beyond its established membership in shops covered by collectively bargained contracts. From the AFL-CIO's Working America program to Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) Fight for a Fair Economy, labor organizations are seeking to expand their reach into working-class communities at large, recognizing that if they are perceived as a narrow special interest that benefits only a few workers, the movement will be destined to permanent decline.

Operations such as Fuerza Laboral represent another strain of organizing among workers that is taking place outside of traditional labor structures. A decade ago, the relationships between emerging workers' centers in different parts of the country and traditional labor unions tended to be mistrustful – if not outright hostile, as Janice Fine discussed in her book "Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream." Few ties existed in most cities. Since then, both sides have made inroads into this challenge and have strengthened their relationships with one another. In the past five years, the AFL-CIO has formed partnerships with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) and with Interfaith Worker Justice.

Yet, gaps in organizational cultures and strategies still remain. The relationships between traditional unions and workers' centers are continually being redefined, and the interaction of the groups represents a vital ongoing conversation.

As for Fuerza Laboral, Shagwert says: "Our board president has started calling us Unity Union. Which is what we are doing: Representing people in terms of grievances, doing a lot of the things a union would do for its members. But we're not a union. We don't identify with workers based on where they are working, we identify with them based on the abuses they are experiencing."

While she cites alliances with unions such as SEIU and labor groups like Jobs with Justice as

crucial to Fuerza's work, she views her organization differently: "It's the way I compare working on human rights to working on the rights of one small minority," she says. "It doesn't feel right to throw our hat in the ring and fight for one particular group of people. We are fighting for all of us because we are fighting for the most vulnerable."

She adds, "I want to find a way to say this that isn't critical of unions. Without unions what would our country be? But I see Fuerza as able to be a little more flexible than a union can be because we don't represent one particular group of workers."

Fuerza Laboral at once embodies an impulse toward mutual aid that has deep roots in the history of workers' struggles and represents a new breed of organization that is expanding in areas where traditional union structures have not been able to reach. For a labor movement that desperately needs to make clear its relevance for all Americans, the task of deepening partnerships with such community allies could not be more urgent.

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