

Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream

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Introduction

In the United States today, millions of workers, many of them new immigrants and people of color, are laboring on the very lowest rungs of metropolitan labor markets with weak prospects for improving the quality of their present positions or advancing to better jobs. It is unfortunate but true that ethnicity, race, and immigration status have enormous impact on the jobs they do, the compensation they receive, and the possibilities they have for redress when mistreated by employers.

When my grandparents came to this country from Vienna at the turn of the last century, they were only a few lucky steps ahead of the Holocaust. Upon arrival at Ellis Island, they had already come through many hardships and knew that many obstacles awaited them here in the United States. But one obstacle they did not face was the legal right to work. From the moment they arrived here, European immigrants received legal authorization to work and started down the

pathway to citizenship. In stark contrast to those immigrants of my grandparents' generation, labor migrants today often have an extremely difficult time obtaining legal status or employment authorization.

The story of immigrant workers in America and the exploitation and prejudice they faced is obviously not a new one. Earlier waves of immigrants encountered serious discrimination, took up some of society's dirtiest and most dangerous jobs, looked to their families and coethnics to build economic stability over time, and fought to expand workers rights and establish labor unions. In the past, large numbers of American workers, including immigrants and African Americans, were able to join together through unions to wage a common struggle for dignity, better wages, and better working conditions, but now unfavorable labor law and employer opposition have made this much more difficult. In addition to unions, mutual aid, and fraternal organizations, political parties, settlement houses, and urban churches also offered immigrants and African-Americans a means of joining together to navigate their economic and political way through American society. But today, although there are some important and inspiring exceptions to the rule, many of these old institutions are no longer available to the vast majority of the nation's working poor. New forms of labor market institutions including new types of unions, community-based organizations, and social movement groups are struggling to fill the void. This study examines one such promising emergent institution: worker centers.

Worker centers are community-based mediating institutions that provide support to low-wage workers. Difficult to categorize, worker centers have some features that are suggestive of the earlier U.S. civic institutions mentioned above. Other features, such as cooperatives and popular education classes, are suggestive of the civic traditions of the home countries from which many recent immigrants came. Centers pursue this mission through a combination of approaches:

Service delivery: providing legal representation to recover unpaid wages; English classes; worker rights education; access to health clinics, bank accounts, and loans

Advocacy: researching and releasing of exposes about conditions in low-wage industries, lobbying for new laws and changes in existing ones, working with government agencies to improve monitoring and grievance processes, and bringing suits against employers

Organizing: building ongoing organizations and engaging in leadership development among workers to take action on their own for economic and political change

The combination of organizing with service and advocacy is what sets these centers apart from other worker centers and immigrant service organizations. The proportions of each of the three elements vary widely from center to center, as does the overall orientation the centers bring to their work.

Mapping worker centers

Given that they account for the majority, the focus of this study is immigrant worker centers in metropolitan areas, but these organizations exist as a subset of a larger body of worker centers—contemporary community-based worker organizing projects that have taken root in communities across the United States in recent years. As a starting point, before we focus on

immigrant worker centers, it is useful to think about this larger set of organizations. Working with an advisory board created for this project, we hammered out the definition of "worker centers" given above and then attempted to identify all centers that fit the definition. As Lawrence Goodwyn observed in *The Populist Moment*, a critical stage in the movement-building process is the "movement seeing itself." I plot all of these organizations on a map of the United States, a regularly updated version of which can be viewed on the Cornell University Press website (<http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu>) on the page for this book. The full list of organizations included on the map are organized by state in Appendix B.

The study methodology was largely qualitative, although a survey of forty organizations was conducted and the data were analyzed and presented in quantitative terms. The worker centers included in the survey are listed in Appendix A.

As of May 2005, there were 137 worker centers. The majority of the organizations (122) are identified as immigrant worker centers. As will become apparent, a wide range of groups has been included—African-American organizations, groups that work with immigrants as well as nonimmigrants, organizations that focus on workfare participants, groups that call themselves unions, and even groups that do not call themselves worker centers. I have endeavored to capture the full breadth of new types of community-based worker organizing projects that are currently active among low-wage workers.

The final component of the study was to conduct nine in-depth case studies. For this first study of the field as a whole, our inclination was to choose established centers that were well thought of. We set out to identify the different worker center models, evaluate the effectiveness of the worker center strategy in improving the lives of low wage workers, and highlight key lessons, strengths, weaknesses, and future challenges. This study assesses immigrant worker centers from a number of different angles and through a variety of interpretive lenses. Our questions going into it were urgent but straightforward ones. What are the institutional mechanisms for integrating low-wage immigrants into American civil society so that they, like those who came before them, are able to avail themselves of the benefits of ongoing organization, economic representation, and political action? Which organizations might become the fixed point in the changing world of work, able to provide the job training, skills development and placement, health insurance and pensions that many employees once accessed through firms? Given the racial polarization of the economy and the disproportionate representation of immigrants and people of color in low-wage employment, what role will race and ethnicity play as constitutive categories for analysis, education, strategy, and action?

Chapter 1 examines the origins and development of the worker center phenomenon. I describe and explain the distinguishing features of these centers and provide brief "snapshots" of some, which are discussed later in the book. I also provide a brief overview of the immigrant communities and subsets of those communities in which worker centers are active.

Chapter 2 begins with an examination of the changing immigration pattern in modern U.S. history to provide a context for looking at the contemporary immigrant scene. This is complemented by a review of recent changes in the U.S. economy that have had a decisive

impact on the status and conditions of low-wage immigrant workers today. Finally, I survey the dramatic decline of immigrant support systems over the last century, arguing that this change has been critical to the rise of worker centers.

Chapter 3 looks at worker center methods of outreach and recruitment, and the important role that community institutions play in this regard. I highlight a central paradox for immigrant worker collective action in general. On the one hand, strong ethnic identities and vibrant social networks facilitate organizing; on the other, the fluid nature of immigration itself and the ability of workers to preserve strong ongoing home country connections can sometimes mitigate against civic participation in the United States. I also explore the challenges of working across ethnicity in industries in which more than one ethnic group is employed as well as the interplay between class, gender, and ethnicity in worker center organizing and advocacy.

Chapter 4 examines worker center service delivery models and explores some of the reasons why centers have decided to make direct service provision an important component of their activities. I offer a closer look at some of the most common services provided and the ways in which these organizations are trying to tie service provision more closely to their mission of organizing and advocacy.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide an overview of strategies pursued by worker centers for raising wages and improving working conditions in low-wage industries. In chapter 5 I look at organizing that targets single employers and entire industries. Also surveyed are efforts to organize day laborers and create independent economic enterprises. Chapter 6 offers case studies of a variety of worker center relationships with labor unions and the efforts of some centers to create independent unions.

Chapters 7 and 8 examine centers' public policy and advocacy activities. In chapter 7 I look at ways centers partner with governmental entities to foster enforcement of existing labor laws and regulations, and organize to push local, state, and federal government agencies for administrative and policy changes. I also review the ability of centers to promote policy and legislative reforms that raise wages and improve working conditions for low-wage workers. Chapter 8 looks at centers' public policy campaigns that fight for immigration reform and immigrant rights and for a broader social justice agenda. I end this chapter with an overall assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of worker centers' public policy campaigns.

Chapters 9 and 10 are devoted to the internal organizational structures and approaches of immigrant worker centers. In chapter 9 I examine how the centers handle leadership development and political education of members, and how they bring people of color and young people into leadership positions. In this chapter, I also look at decision-making, organizational budgets, formal membership, and dues collection structures. In chapter 10 I provide an overview of the variety of networks in which worker centers are involved and offers an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of worker center internal systems, structures, and practices.

Chapter 11 presents an overall assessment of the worker center phenomenon. I identify what I believe are the centers' greatest strengths and significant weaknesses and offer critical thoughts

on their power and effectiveness. I also suggest changes to national labor, immigration, and social policies that could aid their efforts to improve the lives of low-wage workers.

Worker centers have emerged as central components of the immigrant community infrastructure and, in the combination of services, advocacy, and organizing they undertake, are playing a unique role in helping immigrants navigate the worlds of work and legal rights in the United States. They are gateway organizations that are meeting immigrant workers where they are and providing them with a wealth of information and training. Most centers provide a wide range of day-to-day work services: from one-on-one assistance to individuals who walk in the door with employment-related problems to mounting collective action campaigns to change employer, industry, or government policies and practices.

The world of worker centers is hopeful, compassionate, inventive, and dynamic. Confronting the "wild west" of America's largely unregulated low-wage labor markets, and the legal limbo in which many of their members live and work, worker centers have pioneered a host of innovative strategies that attempt to wrest order out of the chaos. The centers evince great skill at creative means of recruitment, leadership development, and democratic participation. They have effectively documented and exposed the exploitation of low-wage workers. They are altering the terms of debate, changing the way people understand the world around them, the problems they face, and the possibilities for social change. In all too many cases, these centers are the only "port in the storm" for low-wage immigrant workers seeking to understand U.S. labor and immigration laws, file back wage claims, and organize against recalcitrant employers.

Through their service provision, advocacy, and organizing work, worker centers are helping to set the political agenda and mobilize a growing constituency to make its voice heard on fundamental labor and immigration reform. This work, in and of itself instrumental to a brighter future for low-wage workers in the United States, is also indispensable to the revitalization of organized labor and progressive politics in America.

About the author

Janice Fine is a member of the faculty of the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University, a senior fellow at the Center for Community Change and a research associate at the Economic Policy Institute. For many years, she has written about the labor movement and community organizing as well as the influence of money in American politics, and has been the recipient of fellowships from the Open Society Institute as well as the Industrial Performance Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In addition to her academic work, Fine has worked as a community, labor, and electoral organizer for more than twenty years. From 1981 to 1983 she was the president of the United States Student Association. During the 1980s, she worked for the AFLCIO in Broward County, Florida; Massachusetts Fair Share in Boston; the Jackson '88 presidential campaign; and numerous other electoral campaigns. During the 1990s,

she founded the New England Money and Politics Project at Northeast Action and played a leading role in passing the nation's first "Clean Election" law in Maine. Until 2003, she was the organizing director at Northeast Action, the hub of a regional network of statewide progressive coalitions and citizen action groups.