

Finding a Place for Immigrant Workers in Today's Labor Movement

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Between March and May 2006, a powerful movement for immigrants' rights went public. More than a million low-wage immigrant workers, outraged by a House bill that would have criminalized their presence in the United States and all those who help them survive day to day, emerged from the shadows and took to the streets.

In major cities and minor suburbs from Los Angeles to Long Island, N.Y., remarkable scenes unfolded as undocumented workers, long hidden in plain sight in the nation's farms, factories and fields, doffed their cloaks, downed their tools and declared "*somos trabajadores no somos criminales*"—we are workers, not criminals.

On May Day, close to a million immigrants engaged in the largest political strike since the movement at the close of the 19th century for the eight-hour day. The AFL-CIO and many international unions have embraced the movement and come out strongly in support of sweeping immigration reform. Labor's support for policy change is critical. But, beyond support for immigration reform, are America's unions prepared to take advantage of the biggest opportunity for growth they have encountered in decades? Are they culturally prepared and organizationally structured to admit these workers *en masse* into union ranks?

Many low-wage immigrant workers in the United States today work in industries with few or no unions through which they could speak and act to effect improvements. Into this breach, new modes of organization have struggled to emerge. The worker center is one promising example of such institutions. These centers are community-based mediating institutions that provide support to communities of low-wage workers, overwhelmingly immigrants.

The majority of centers provide services, first and foremost legal assistance regarding employment-related issues, and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, but they also play an important matchmaking role in introducing their members to services available through other agencies such as health clinics. Many function as clearinghouses on employment law—writing and distributing "know your rights" handbooks and fact sheets and conducting workshops. They carry out research and release exposés about conditions in low-wage industries and try to uphold the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act and other employment regulations. A major focus is on identifying industry abuses and working with government agencies to devise more effective enforcement strategies. They also are organizing.

Centers have had to devise creative strategies to win improvements for low-wage workers under circumstances of high turnover industries and impermanent employment relationships. They have had significant success improving working conditions and raising wages through direct economic action on employers and industries and through local and state public policy initiatives. Part of their power derives from being able to organize a base of the working poor to speak from their own experiences. Hearing directly from the workers themselves has moved local elected officials and

community residents in community after community to empathic positions as they have connected their own immigrant pasts to those of these newcomers.

The number of worker centers in the United States has increased significantly in the past several years, paralleling the increased flow of specific immigrant groups in large numbers to the United States as well as the decline of labor unions. In 1992 there were fewer than five centers nationwide; as of 2006 there are at least 140 worker centers in more than 80 U.S. cities, towns and rural areas.

How have worker centers worked with unions? So far, not all that closely. Only 14 percent of worker centers in a 2003 survey I conducted had a direct connection to unions and union organizing drives. Nine percent of worker centers in the survey were founded explicitly to fill the gap left by the decline of unionization in particular industries but were not founded by unions. In many instances, worker centers have reached out to unions on behalf of workers interested in gaining representation, but they have struggled to find a union willing to take the workers on.

Understandably, given what they are up against, unions that are most adept at organizing in low-wage industries choose their targets very carefully and then focus exclusively on those campaigns. They reject reactive organizing—disparaging the “hot shop” approach in which unions respond to shops that reach out to them whether or not they fit within the union's core industry. In addition, they are most likely to focus on workers whose employment relationships can be traced to very large corporations (via sub-contracting supply chains). But this approach leaves out a lot of the low-wage immigrant workers who come to worker centers and often work in highly competitive industries characterized by small employers, subcontractors and shorter-term employment relationships (overwhelmingly in the private sector).

To address these situations, unions should work with worker centers to improve overall labor standards via public policy initiatives and improved enforcement strategies. They also should work together to develop new models of membership and organization that enable them to provide low-wage workers what craft unions have traditionally provided for construction and entertainment workers. To respond to conditions in today's low-wage industries, unions must create models of permanent organization that bring workers into membership across a multitude of employers and provide the voice, political community, stability, training and access to benefits that they cannot get from their employers.

I am not suggesting that unions embark upon a fool's errand—conducting traditional organizing campaigns in inhospitable places. But I am suggesting there are ways to offer meaningful membership in the labor movement to low-wage workers whose employers are not traditional union targets. I am not talking about the “associate memberships” many unions experimented with a generation ago but rather about a robust full membership model that is just not premised on a long-term relationship with a single employer. There are too many workers in this situation today for today's unions not to be able to accommodate them.

In addition to new membership models, there must be ways for worker centers as organizations to become affiliated if they choose, either through being chartered as locals by international unions or by becoming directly affiliated locals of the AFL-CIO.

The first step to bridging the gap is for organized labor to stop looking at these organizations instrumentally—asking what is in it for them in the short term. Organizations that are providing services to, advocating for and organizing low-wage workers are carrying out functions that are essential to the 21st century labor movement. They ought to be welcomed into the ranks of organized labor.

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