

**BREAKING NEW GROUND**

Some unions have responded to the re-structuring of the production process by expanding their scope along the value chain. This is a relatively new approach and IG Metall is still in the process of developing its strategy.

However, organising along the value chain is an approach worth exploring. For one, trade unions need to find and experiment with new organisational forms to respond to changes in the mode of production. An innovative feature is that unions reject the notion of a core and non-core and start seeing the workplace as a whole. Divisions in the workplace which pitch workers against each other only benefit employers. Therefore, to organise along value chains can be a way to create or revive workers' solidarity. As IG Metall assumes, outsourced workers won't be able to fight for better working conditions alone. It's necessary that workers from OEMs, who are better unionised and have a stronger position on the labour market, link up with their struggles. Paying attention to and organising along value chains also strengthens trade unions' bargaining power. It increases their ability to identify and target those parts of the value chain where it hurts employers most and therefore to lead strikes more effectively for the sake of all workers in the value chain.

At present, organising attempts that focus on the value chain are still in experimental stages and more work needs to be done to develop a coherent strategy as this approach also presents its own difficulties and challenges. However, by uniting workers along the value chain, trade unions are indeed breaking new ground. <sup>LB</sup>

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# Worker centres:

## Organising at edge of American dream

In the United States today, millions of workers, many of them immigrants and people of colour, are labouring on the very lowest rungs of metropolitan labour markets, with limited prospects for improving the quality of their present positions or advancing to better jobs. It is an unfortunate but true fact that their immigration status, combined with their ethnic and racial origins has perhaps the greatest impact on the jobs they do, the compensation they receive, and the possibilities they have for redress when mistreated by employers, writes **Janice Fine**.

**W**hile employers manifest an enormous hunger for immigrant workers – literally hiring them by the millions – the nation's immigration policy has exacerbated their vulnerability to exploitation. The silent compact between employers and employees is simple: in exchange for corporate indifference to their exact legal status, workers will not make a fuss about conditions or compensation. America's immigration policy has become one of her central *de facto* labour market policies.

The story of exploitation of immigrant workers in America is obviously not a new one. Earlier waves of immigrants faced serious discrimination, took up some of society's dirtiest and most dangerous jobs, looked to their families and fellow immigrants to build economic stability over time, fought to expand workers' rights and establish labour unions. But in contrast to earlier periods in US history, prospects for contemporary immigrant workers' participation at the workplace, integration into

community life and American politics and society more generally have narrowed.

Many of the institutions, civic groups, parties and especially labour organisations that once existed to help them have either disappeared or declined dramatically. More and more, low-wage immigrant workers exist within industries in which there are few or no unions or other organisational vehicles through which they can speak and act. Into this breach, new types of institutions have struggled to emerge over the past several decades. This study explores one such promising emergent institution – worker centres.

#### ABOUT THE STUDY

The Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG), in partnership with the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) commissioned a study of worker centers, most of whom are working with a predominantly immigrant population, and were identified by key informants as among the most advanced and promising models emerging in this area. The goals of the research were: to identify various worker centre 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 organisations was conducted and the quantitative data from this sample is analysed and presented along with nine case studies. Working with an advisory board created for this project, the definition of ‘worker centres’ used in the following analysis is as follows: community-based and community-led organisations that engage in a combination of service, advocacy and organising to provide support to low-wage workers. The vast majority of them have grown up to serve

predominantly or exclusively immigrant populations. According to Steven Pitts, there are a few centres that serve a more African-American-focused population or bring immigrants together with African-Americans.

The focus of this study is immigrant worker centers, but these organisations exist as a subset of a larger body of contemporary community-based and worker-led organising projects that have taken root in communities across the United States in recent years. There are also other centres, especially among the day labourer population that provide services and advocacy but are not presently engaging in organising. It was the organisations that were engaging in grassroots organising, and those that were doing so among immigrant workers, that were the specific focus of this study.

#### WORKER CENTRES DEFINED

Worker centres are community-based mediating institutions that provide support to communities of low-wage workers. As work is the primary focus of life for many newly arriving immigrants, it is also the locus of many of the problems they experience. This is why, although they actually pursue a broad agenda that includes many aspects of immigrant life in America, most of the organisations call themselves ‘worker centers’.

Difficult to categorise, worker centers have some features that are suggestive of earlier US civic institutions, including settlement houses, fraternal organisations, local civil rights organisations and unions. They identify with social movement traditions and draw upon community organising strategies. Other features, especially cooperatives and popular education classes, are suggestive of the civic traditions of the home countries from

which many of these immigrants came. Some are based in one specific industry while others are non-industry based, many are a mixture of both – they have specific industry projects as well as other geographic and issue-based activities.

Centres pursue their mission through a combination of approaches:

- Service delivery, including legal representation to recover unpaid wages; English classes; worker rights education; access to health clinics; bank accounts and loans.
- Advocacy, including researching and releasing 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.
- Organising, building ongoing organisations and engaging in leadership development among workers to take action on their own behalf for economic and political change.

Worker centres vary in terms of their organisational models, how they think about their mission and how they carry out their work. Nonetheless, in the combination of services, advocacy and organising they undertake, worker centres are playing a unique role in helping low-wage immigrants navigate the world of work in the United States. They provide low-wage immigrant workers a range of opportunities for expressing their ‘collective voice’ as well as for taking collective action.

One of the most interesting features of worker centres is their independence from each other as well as from other organisations or networks. Notwithstanding this independence, many worker centres initially emerged in

response to needs identified by preexisting groups or movements.

The number of worker centres in the United States has increased significantly over the past decade, paralleling the decline of labour unions and the increased flow of specific immigrant groups in large numbers to the US. In 1992 there were fewer than five centres nationwide. Their numbers increased dramatically in the early to mid-nineties, growing at a rate of 10 to 20 new centres opening each year for several years. As of 2005, there are at least 135 worker centres, in over 80 US cities, towns, and rural areas.

### SNAPSHOTS OF WORKER CENTRES

*The Workplace Project* began as a project of CARECEN, a social service agency for Central American immigrants on Long Island, as more and more came to its offices seeking redress for unpaid wages and other employment-related problems. *Workplace Project* staff and volunteers were appalled by the Department of Labour's (DoL) cavalier refusal to adequately respond to the numerous claims it was receiving from immigrant housekeepers, restaurant workers and day labourers. Beginning in 1993, the Project began to systematically monitor the DoL's behaviour with regard to its acceptance and pursuit of these cases. These results documented a pattern of flagrant disregard for the problems faced by low-wage immigrant workers. Jennifer Gordon concluded that they proved to be instrumental to cultivating members of the media at the *New York Times* and *Newsday*, in building alliances with Democrats and Republicans in state government to pass the strongest unpaid wages law in the United States.

*The Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee (TWSC)* in Virginia began in 1986 as a

community-organising entity that focused on helping 2,000 African-American, Latino and immigrant low income residents of the Arlandria neighborhood of Alexandria fight eviction from their subsidised housing and convert a 300-unit building into a limited equity coop. Over the years the organisation has grown into a local civil rights movement that is involved in a host of projects. It does community organising in several other neighbourhoods in Alexandria as well as Arlington and other Northern Virginia communities and besides housing, it has taken up a number of local issues including public education and youth programming, health care, sustainable development and zoning and living wages.

In addition, TWSC carries out worker organising among immigrant and African-American hospitality workers, child-care providers and taxi drivers. Each of these groups of workers has an organisation that is affiliated with the TWSC. The organisation has won a local living wage ordinance, better working conditions for child-care workers, important improvements in the public schools and, over the past several years successfully negotiated with area hospitals to forgive over one million dollars of debt of low wage families.

The *Chicago Interfaith Worker Rights Center* emerged out of the work of the Chicago Interfaith Committee on Workers Issues between labour unions and area religious institutions. After years of work mobilising clergy to support union organising campaigns, the Interfaith Committee and a number of its churches became known as places immigrant workers could bring their employment-related problems. In 1998, the Interfaith Committee published and distributed a workers' rights manual in English

and Spanish that generated enormous response from area immigrant workers. Many who called had been unaware of their rights, and many were undocumented and afraid to seek help.

The DoL was largely inaccessible both because of language barriers and limited office hours – it was only open from 9am to 5pm. Workers turned to their clergy and congregations for support, but these organisations didn't necessarily know how to help. Lacking an infrastructure to handle the growing numbers seeking help and organising support, the Interfaith Committee opened two worker centres on Chicago's north and northwest sides, both are located within the walls of religious institutions. The organisation has helped dozens of groups of workers to organise to achieve improvements at their workplaces including matching several with local unions for organising drives.

Eight Day Labour hiring halls are operated by two community organisations in Los Angeles the *Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA)* and the *Instituto de Educacion Popular del Sur de California (IDEPSCA)*. The groups work with day labourers on an ongoing basis to set the rules that govern the centres. CHIRLA is the largest community-based immigrant rights organisation in Los Angeles and began in 1986 in response to the impact of the changes in federal immigration law. While initially it functioned as an umbrella organisation for a coterie of local groups, it added a focus on workers' rights and eventually direct organising of immigrant workers as the day labour issues in Los Angeles grew increasingly serious in the late 1980s.

According to its internal documents IDEPSCA is a non-profit community-based

organisation that grew out of local community organising efforts of a group of Chicano and Latino parents around issues of 'racism, educational inequities and the lack of affordable housing'. Dedicated to improving the educational opportunities and economic self-sufficiency of low-income Latino families through popular education and organising, in addition to three hiring halls, it operates adult Spanish literacy and English as a Second Language (ESL) programmes, a computer literacy project, youth and women's programmes.

Staff members for the two organisations work on-site helping to facilitate the day-to-day operation of the hiring halls. They offer a variety of services to day labourers including help with unpaid wage claims and immigration issues, ESL classes and tool lending. They engage in advocacy on a host of public policy issues that affect day labourers and make efforts to mobilise day labourers at rallies and hearings in support of these issues. CHIRLA and IDEPSCA are the backbone of a vibrant day labourers' and immigrant workers' movement in Los Angeles.

The *Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment (CAFÉ)* began in Greenville in 1980 as a project of Southerners for Economic Justice (SEJ). Organised in the mid-1970s by civil rights leader Julian Bond and others, it was founded upon the belief that 'newly-won civil rights were incomplete if people had little or no rights on the job'. Sensing a clear need on the part of thousands of South Carolinians working in firms where union organisation was highly unlikely, SEJ started the Worker's Right Project (WRP) in Greenville in 1980. Its mission was to help workers who were not represented by unions and unlikely to be so in the future to take action.

By 1985, the WRP, which became CAFÉ, had been contacted by workers in over 50 cities and towns across South Carolina. It developed 'job rights workshops' which taught about employment laws and organising that were held in 10 cities around the state.

In 1986, the organisation won passage of a new state law that made it harder to fire injured workers. Since then, the organisation has taken the lead on contingent worker issues fighting for public policy changes and taking on Manpower and other large temporary agencies. CAFÉ has broadened its agenda beyond employment issues to public education, criminal justice and domestic violence. In recent years, the organisation has begun to organise chapters among and provide assistance to the growing numbers of newly arrived Latino immigrant workers.

Founded in 1992, the *Korean Immigrant Worker Advocates (Kiwa)* organises restaurant and grocery store workers in the Koreatown neighbourhood of Los Angeles. After a number of years of filing claims and lawsuits on behalf of individual restaurant workers, it launched the Restaurant Workers Justice Campaign in 1997. A major focus of the campaign was increasing compliance with minimum wage laws in the industry. By 2000 as a result of the campaign, Kiwa estimated that the compliance rate of Koreatown restaurants had increased from about 2% to over 50%.

In 2000-01, Kiwa moved to create two independent organisations, one for restaurant workers, and the other for workers in Koreatown's seven ethnic grocery stores. The Restaurant Workers Association of Koreatown (RWAK) is an independent organisation based at Kiwa, which operates as a quasi-union, offering a range of

member benefits. It operates a free medical clinic and through Kiwa helps members file claims for overtime and other wage claims as well as workers' compensation. It has an ESL component that teaches workers English they need to know in the restaurant industry as well as a vocabulary for organising.

*The New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA)* had its origins in 1992 in the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAAV), a pan-Asian organisation that was begun by young activists in New York City in the 1980s. Since 1997, it has established itself both with the media as well as the relevant governmental bodies as the leading voice of the 40,000 Yellow Cab drivers in New York City. In 2002 and 2003, the organisation developed a successful multi-pronged strategy to campaign for a fare increase. It partnered with the Brennan Center of New York University Law School to produce research reports on wages and conditions in the industry which provided the organisation with a great deal of data to back up its claims to the media and government officials. By the fall of 2003, NYTWA had the attention of the major media and public officials. Over the next several months, it was the major voice of taxi drivers in the media and the major player on the drivers' side that negotiated and won the first fare increase in eight years.

*The Garment Worker Center (GWC)* in Los Angeles was organised a few years after UNITE was defeated in its efforts to organise the garment industry and closed down its Garment Workers Justice Center there. With 90,000 primarily Latina and Chinese immigrant women working for more than 5,000 contractors, many under sweatshop conditions, despite the difficulties of organising a union, a coalition of legal aid and community



organisations decided to open GWC to provide legal, organising and advocacy support. Based in the heart of the garment district, the organisation has Chinese and Latina staff and volunteers who help workers learn about their rights, file claims for back wages and act collectively to push contractors, manufacturers, retailers, industry leaders and government officials to improve conditions.

The organisation has established itself as the voice of immigrant workers in the fashion industry in Los Angeles, garnering extensive media coverage of workplace abuses, winning hundreds of thousands in back-wages, developing an active leadership body of garment workers and connecting strongly to the global anti-sweatshop movement.

*Omaha Together One Community (OTOC)* is a faith-based organising group affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation. In 1998, the organisation began looking at the difficult conditions under which

the largely Mexican workforce was labouring in the meatpacking industry in Nebraska. In 1999, OTOC organised a rally with 1,200 people that focused on conditions in the meatpacking plants. In the fall and winter of that year, its efforts gained the strong support of the governor and lieutenant governor, who held investigations and promulgated a 'meatpacker's bill of rights' in the first months of 2000.

Also that year, OTOC's workers' committee began sponsoring clinics with meatpacking workers on how to prevent and seek treatment for repetitive stress injuries. In June of 2000, OTOC and the UFCW announced their plan to organise 4,000 area packinghouse workers and launched the organising in earnest. In less than two years, the partnership resulted in close to a thousand new workers being organised into the Omaha UFCW local. <sup>18</sup>

*Janice Fine, Center for Community Change and Rutgers University.*

## CHARACTERISTICS OF WORKER CENTRES

While there is wide variation among worker centres in terms of programmes and emphasis, most have the following common features:

- **They are hybrids:** All combine elements of different types of organisations, including social service agencies, fraternal organisations, settlement house models, community organising groups, unions and social movement organisations.
- **Service provision:** Centres provide services, from legal assistance and ESL classes to check-cashing, but 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 ongoing workshops.
- **Advocacy:** Centres conduct research and release exposés about conditions in low-wage industries, lobby for new labour and immigration laws and changes in existing ones, work with government agencies to improve monitoring and grievance processes and bring suits against employers.
- **Organising:** Centres build ongoing organisations and engage in leadership

development among workers to take action on their own behalf for economic and political change. This organising may take different forms depending upon the centre, but all share a common commitment to providing a means through which workers can take action. Immigrant worker centres organise around both economic issues and immigrant rights. Centres pursue these goals by seeking to impact the labour market through direct economic action on the one hand and public policy reform activity on the other.

- **Place-based rather than work-site based:** Often workers come into a centre because they live or work in the centre's geographic area of focus, not because they work in a specific industry or occupation. Within local labour markets they often target particular employers and industries for attention, but most worker centres are not work-site based. That is to say, unlike unions, their focus is not organising for majority representation in individual work-sites or for contracts for individual groups of workers. Some day labourer centres do connect workers with employers and negotiate with them on wages and conditions of work.
- **Strong ethnic and racial identification:** Sometimes ethnicity, rather than occupation or industry is the primary identity through which workers come into relationship with centres. 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. In addition, a growing number of centres are working at the intersection between race, gender and low-wage work. Most centres are based in immigrant communities.

- **Leadership development and internal democracy:** Most centres 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 work to develop the skills of worker leaders so that they are able to participate meaningfully in guiding the organisations.
- **Popular education:** Centres identify strongly with the philosophy and teaching methods of Paulo Freire and other popular educators and draw upon literacy circles and other models that originated in Central and South American liberation movements. They view education as integral to organising. Workshops, courses and training sessions are structured to emphasise the development of critical thinking skills and bringing these skills to bear on all information that is presented.
- **Identification as part of a global movement:** Centres demonstrate a deep sense of solidarity with workers in other countries and an ongoing focus on the global impact of labour and trade policies. Some worker centre founders and leaders had extensive experience with organising in their countries of origin and actively draw upon those traditions in their current work. Many centres maintain ongoing ties with popular organisations in the countries from which workers have migrated, share strategies, publicise each other's work and support each other as they are able. Some centres work with Mexican consulates to help members access the *matricula consular* (Mexican identification card) and also with home governments on immigration and development issues.
- **A broad agenda:** While centres place particular emphasis on work-related problems, they have a broad orientation and generally respond to the variety of issues faced by recent immigrants to the United States. They often tackle immigration law reform and related issues like drivers' licenses and social security no-match letters as well as housing, education, health care and criminal justice issues.
- **Coalition building:** Centres favour alliances with religious institutions and government agencies and seek to work closely with other worker centres, non-profit agencies, community organisations and activist groups by participating in many formal and informal coalitions.
- **Small and involved memberships:** Most centres 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 organisation in order to qualify. At the same time, there is a lot of ambivalence about charging dues, and while about 40% of centres say they have a dues requirement, few have worked out systems to be able to collect them regularly.